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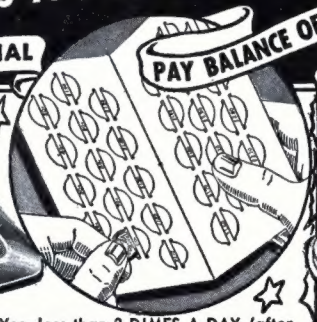

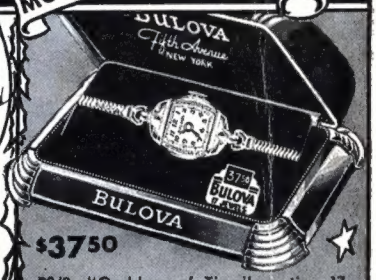

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North West ROMANCES

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager
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52

Vol. XIV, No. 7 FEBRUARY ISSUE, 1943 20c per copy

TWO POWERFUL NORTHLAND NOVELS

GIRL OF THE GOLDEN AVALANCHE . . . . Moran Tudury 3
On icy Skull Mountain, Tom Carey made a death gamble for a gallant girl's life—knowing the dice were loaded, and his bonanza payoff to be bushwhack lead.

THE HE-WOLF'S WHELP . . . . . Dex Volney 70
Lanier was the fanged-mouth whelp of a murdered lobo sire, and he stalked his blood revenge on the merciless McCade clan.

THREE SMASHING SNOWLAND NOVELETS

BOOMERANG BONANZA . . . . . Frederick L. Nebel 53
Jackson and Dongan had been too smart—they were caught in a phony gold rush they had started themselves.

STALKER OF THE DEATH TRAIL . . . . Arthur Lawson 100
Bob Batten, hate where his heart had been, chased a phantom through the icy Barrens.

QUEEN OF THE TUNDRA MEN . . . . Sgt. Dan O'Rourke 110
Kate Rendo's Klondike throne was toppling—rocked by the tundra ghost of a man long dead.

THREE NORTHLAND SHORT STORIES

TIMBER TRAP . . . . . A. deHerries Smith 34
Wolf Tooth Reserve was a tinder-box—and fire-bugs prowled its depths.

LOGGER LAW . . . . . Evan Slyter 42
The Kid wouldn't fight—yet a man had to prove his worth by the weight of his fists.

LAST BOAT TO OUTSIDE . . . . . H. J. McCabe 63
Eastman could see the boat landing just ahead—and on the landing were the two callous murderers who had left him to die in the Arctic wastes.

NORTHWEST ROMANCES: Published bi-monthly by Glen-Kel Publishing Co., Inc., 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y.

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This issue dated December 15th, 1942. Entered as second class matter June 4th, 1936, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscription rate for U. S. A., $1.20 yearly. This is a magazine of fiction; the characters named and incidents described do not refer to any actual person. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address THE NEWSSTAND FICTION UNIT, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

Printed in U. S. A.

Dear Pop:

Even an old Rainbow Divisioner like you would pop your eyes at the army we're putting together this time. Let me tell you, they're doing everything to make up just about the best bunch of fighting galoots you ever saw.

And that goes for what they do for us off duty, too! Take this new clubhouse we got just outside of camp. It's got radios, dance floors, nice soft chairs and everything. And, Pop, you can get something to eat that won't cost you a month's pay!

Now, the army isn't running this. The USO is. And most of the other camps got USO clubs too, because you and a lot of other folks dug down and gave the money to the USO last year.

But, Pop, you know what's happened since then. Guys've been streaming into uniform. Last year there was less than 2 million of us. This year there'll be 4 million. And the USO needs a lot more dough to serve that many men—around 32,000,000 bucks I hear.

Now, Pop, I know you upped with what you could last time. But it would sure be swell if you could dig into the old sock again. Maybe you could get some of the other folks in the neighborhood steamed up, too.

It will mean an awful lot to the fellows in camp all over the country. Sort of show 'em the homefolks are backing them up. And, Pop, an old soldier like you knows that's a mighty nice feeling for a fellow to have. See what you can do, huh, Pop?

Bill

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GIRL OF THE GOLDEN AVALANCHE

A STIRRING NOVEL
OF YUKON DESTINY

by

MORAN TUDURY

Wert

Returning shot for shot, pushing the girl behind him, Carey backed into camp.

Girl of the Golden Avalanche

By MORAN TUDURY

Tom Carey made a chechako play for a golden cache when he helped Wendy Barr fight treacherous Olaf Anton. For the dice were loaded in that Skull Mountain game—and his bonanza payoff was bushwhack lead.

TOM CAREY'S hands squeezed his cards. One glance told him he held three aces. In this game three of a kind ought to mean pay dirt—the first square meal in twenty-four hours for his dog team and himself. Carey hadn't done much gambling in his life, but now he did not hesitate. He picked up the last dollar

he had in the world, threw it on the table. He could taste that steak now.

Across from him the one-eyed Klondiker squinted. His beady single eye darted from Carey's dollar back to his own hand. He scowled, covered the bet.

"Call," he snapped.

Tom Carey exhibited his three aces confidently. But as he laid them down face-up he grew uneasy. His eyes were on the Klondiker's face, and Klondike was grinning triumphantly. He showed his own hand—a full house. He swept in the pot, draining his glass.

"Hell," he growled, "I thought you had somethin'."

Dully, Carey watched that vanishing of his last dollar. He started to push back his chair, when the Klondike man's voice halted him. His expression was cunning.

"Ain't quittin'?"

Carey's huge shoulders shrugged. "I'm cleaned."

"Wait a minute," the other said. "You ain't cleaned yet." He indicated the huge figure of bone, muscle and fur at Carey's feet—a ninety-five pound Malemute. "Ain't that the lead-dog for your team? The one that run second in the Sweeps? He's worthy fifty. Set down. The dog's good in this game."

Carey laughed scornfully, and patted Champ's head. The Klondiker was one of Olaf Anton's men—Anton whose persecution had already brought Tom Carey to the brink of ruin. Nobody connected with Olaf Anton was ever going to own Champ. Not if Carey knew it.

"Mebbe I'll raise the ante," the Klondiker offered.

"You couldn't raise it enough—or Anton either," Carey said curtly, and stood up. He tightened his belt to ease the empty feeling in his stomach. Then he saw something that made him forget the man from Klondike—and hunger, too.

Lieutenant McDowell was beckoning to him from another table. As Carey walked over, he was acutely aware of the trimness of the uniform of his former chief. That uniform recalled to him what a short time ago Tom Carey had been a sergeant of Alaskan police . . . before necessity turned him to gambling for a living.

"Sit down, Tom." Carey felt the wintry eyes of the older officer upon him. He did not blame McDowell for what had happened. No squarer man lived in all Alaska. But McDowell's hands had been hopelessly tied.

Nevertheless, the officer's words bit deeply.

"You better clear out, Tom," he said. "You ain't doin' yourself no good here, an' will only get into trouble. Get out o' town, Tom."

Carey said, "That's another of Anton's ideas, isn't it?"

"You can't do no good here, Tom," McDowell repeated evasively, and Carey frowned. His assumption was correct. It was Olaf Anton's idea that Tom Carey get out of town. And Anton was boss.

This was the Arctic monarch that Sergeant Tom Carey had arrested. Right here, in the Paystreak Saloon. Anton, drunk, had brained an Aleut with a bottle. Arresting Anton, Carey had had to subdue him. Six hours after being jailed, Anton was out. All of his power for revenge bore down on Tom Carey. Lieutenant McDowell was Carey's sole champion. Anton demanded Carey's removal. McDowell sought a compromise, asking Carey to accept demotion.

But Tom Carey flatly refused. He would not take demotion for an act that had been his sworn duty.

So he went out. Now, penniless, he realized he would lose the farm he had been buying—that farm which, under Alaska's long summer days had produced cabbages weighing fifty pounds. He had no money for the payments, and the bank had revealed that Anton interests owned his mortgage. He had no food for himself or his dog team. And now . . . ordered out of town.

TOM CAREY had been born and bred in Alaska. At twenty-six, he was big like its mountains, the blood of his youth coursing through him like Alaska's mighty rapids. Only here in this country could he ever be content. He was certain of it.

His eyes met McDowell's. Tom knew, had the same wish. That somehow, some day, Anton of Mad Mountain would be revealed for what he was—the crooked czar of Alaska.

"If there was any way to help you, I'd do it." McDowell's face was set harshly.

"But while that man lives, Tom—you haven't a chance. It's you or him—and right now it's *him.*"

His mind was bitter. It was his arrest of Anton that had ruined him. Many figured Anton was the most powerful man in Alaska. The giant Swede ruled the Mad Mountain country, its coal fields, mines, timberlands. He owned everything worth owning and had a political organization of Kusiak gunmen equal to any emergency. People believed his wild boast that he was the only man in the world who had ever mastered a mountain.

Carey stirred. "All right, Mac. I'll go." His big hands felt of his empty pockets and he laughed bitterly. "There isn't much pay dirt for me here anyhow."

McDowell took out his wallet. "If you want anything, Tom—"

But Carey shook his head. He didn't want charity.

When Lieutenant McDowell had departed, Carey still sat there. He was hunched there, Champ at his feet, when the saloon door swung open, and a man and woman came in. The girl fixed his attention immediately. Even in her white parka, he instinctively realized she was a chechako. And she was excited about something.

Carey could hear her talking with Peg-leg Polson, the bartender. To his surprise Peg-leg was pointing at him. Then he saw her turn her head. The next he knew, she was walking toward his table.

Then it came to Carey she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. It might have been fancifulness on his part but her eyes seemed blue as Norway spruce, the hair revealed by the drawn-back capot yellow as panned gold. A slim, handful-sized girl, Carey imagined she had a sweet and gentle voice. But in this he was immediately disappointed. As he got to his feet, she addressed him with a cool matter-of-factness that astonished him.

"I understand you keep dogs," she said. Right?"

Her curt tone irked him. "I'm a dog-puncher, if that's what you mean," he answered. "I've got a team."

"All right," the girl said. "Then you're hired."

Carey scowled. It must be his clothes. He had worn these wrinkled corduroys for some time, his boots were far from new. The duffel lining of his moosehide mittens was ragged. Realization that he probably looked like what he actually was —a man without a cent in his pocket— stung him.

"So I'm hired?" he repeated, flushing. "That's fine."

The girl didn't appear to note his irritation. She turned to the young man at her side—also a tenderfoot, Carey realized, but one with hard eyes and a heavy jaw.

"I told you we'd find somebody, Bert," she said triumphantly, then to Carey, "I'll pay you one hundred dollars—in advance. How soon can you be ready to make a trip?"

His eyes steadied. It had been a long time since he had seen a hundred dollars. A hundred dollars would feed his team and himself for quite a spell. He began to think about that steak again.

The girl was looking at him, apparently without seeing him. Carey realized that he was not a personality to her but simply something that she was buying for a hundred dollars in accordance with a plan.

"You know Olaf Anton?" she asked. "That's where I'm going. I want to go to Olaf Anton."

Carey's jaw set. Mention of Anton's name made the hundred dollars vanish—like that.

"Then it's a deal," the girl said. "Everything's settled.

Carey shook his head. "No," he said, "it isn't a deal. You'll have to find someone else. I can't take you there."

HE wasn't interested in her reason for wanting to make such a trip. But no possible good could come of Tom Carey taking her to Mad Mountain and Olaf Anton—neither for her or himself. It was the last place he should go. It wasn't fear of Anton's gunmen, nor because of avalanche warnings that were already out. It was simply that there was no sense in asking for more trouble right now.

She was staring at him coolly.

"You want more money. I'll make it—"

"No," Carey said. "I don't want more money."

The girl grew angry. "Then it's be-

cause you're like the rest! You're one of Olaf Anton's men!"

Carey laughed—the idea of his being in league with the man who had ruined him. He laughed bitterly.

"You'll change your mind," the girl insisted, flushing.

"No," Carey said, "I won't change my mind."

"Then I'll get there in spite of you!" she cried in sudden anger. Her blue eyes burned into his.

He shrugged. There was nothing to say.

She and her companion turned away. Carey watched her departure regretfully. He could have used a hundred dollars. At the door he saw the pair halt. The man seemed to be arguing with her. Whatever the argument, he lost. A minute later, he left. The girl still stood there. She was near the bar, her eyes going around the room searchingly, her face angry and alert.

Carey had to admit it. Lovely to look at—and plenty of spunk.

Yet, no matter how determined, she was starkly out of place. Rough, whiskey-slopped tables, unplaned plank walls, thick tobacco haze that hung over hard-bitten sourdoughs, yellow-skinned breeds—that was the Paystreak. The familiar scene suddenly was revealed to Carey in all its harshness. Profanity from a near-by faro dealer made him scowl. This was no place for a woman.

In the girl's bearing now he detected an unsuspected and abrupt helplessness—instantly, saw the reason.

The Klondiker who had relieved Carey of his last dollar was approaching her. The one-eyed breed was feeling his liquor. Carey's eyes narrowed at the lurch, red-faced grimace. Lucky at cards, the Klondiker apparently also believed himself gifted with women. A sweeping and unsteady bow saluted the girl.

"I got fine husky team," he said loudly. "I drive you anywhere. I don't charge you nothin'."

Men looked up from their cards, grinning. No galantry marred their amusement. Women who came into the Paystreak must be seeking male company. Only Carey was beginning to suspect that some vital reason must have brought this slim girl here, made her remain after her companion left. He was now sure of it.

"I don't charge you one damn cent!" shouted the Klondiker.

In the roar of laughter, the girl's face reddened. Carey saw her glance apprehensively at the bartender. But Peg-leg Polson abruptly moved down the bar, began to wash glasses. Polson, like everybody in this room, wanted no trouble with one of Olaf Anton's men.

"We take fine ride together." the Klondiker repeated. He drew nearer. The girl shrank back against the wall. Her face was white. All her confidence had vanished.

Of all those here, Tom Carey best had reason to know the power of Anton and his men from Mad Mountain. Those around him were standing up, but none intended to take her part.

"Keep away from me!"

The low cry startled Carey. This was none of his business. He was in enough trouble, already. But something stirred him. Perhaps, the thought that he had been buying that farm for just such a girl.

He shouldered through the onlookers.

"Cut that out."

Anton's henchman swung around, staring blearedly. His ham-like hand made a single deprecatory gesture at Carey, then he turned back to the girl.

CAREY felt the eyes of every man there on him. All knew his story—that Olaf Anton had made a vagrant out of him. Peg-leg Polson leaned across the bar, expression hostile.

"Forget it, Tom," he advised. "Keep out of this."

Klondike's heavy hand fell on the girl's shoulder.

Then Carey had Klondike's arm gripped, spinning him around. The breed cursed and swung. The man came at him like a bull, his roar filling the room. Arms opened wide, he lunged. Then Carey's fist smashed him.

Klondike paused in mid-lunge, hurtled back to the wall. Momentarily, he hung there, as if pinned. Then he leaped for Carey.

Carey took his time. He had handled Aleut drunks. The madman coming at him merely made him grin. This time Klondike would get Tom Carey's Sunday

punch. Then something hit Carey across the back of the head. It was Peg-leg Polson, swinging a bung-pin. He swayed, reached blindly for support. Klondike closed in, mighty arms around him, tightening.

He fought to get his arms free . . . to loose the iron bands crushing him. He hit the floor, Klondike on top—slugging him in the face. Red and black flashes stabbed his vision. His lungs pumped like leaking bellows. Senses clouded under that attack.

Then something changed. Realization broke over him cloudily. He stared wonderingly.

Klondike was not on top of him. Klondike had rolled over on the floor. The breed was groaning, arms wrapped strangely about his head. Carey's eyes fluttered dazedly.

The girl in the white parka stood over Klondike. She held a chair, and was crying in fury:

"How do you like it? We can play that way, too!"

Carey got up slowly. The girl came toward him, grabbed his arm. Her voice was insistent.

"We'd better get out now."

She shoved him toward the door. Then Champ growled. The great husky had turned, and Carey saw why. Klondike was on his feet, a knife out, gripped by its blade-point. His arm swung back.

Carey swerved, snatched up a table—threw it. He heard the thump of Klondike's falling body. The room thundered with men running to Klondike's side. The girl's voice roused him.

"Come on. We'd better get out. They don't like us in here."

Carey could have laughed at that. But he didn't. His head ached. He shoved her outside, following.

COLD of the Arctic night hit him, seeming to plunge twin icicles down his nostrils. After the baking smoke-filled room, it revived him. He stumbled beside the girl, their mukluks creaking on packed snow. Ahead, the yellow lights of town danced warmly. Then he heard the girl's voice.

"Thank you," she said. "My name's Barr—Wendy Barr."

Carey said, "Your friend shouldn't have left you there. That wasn't any place for a girl. He must have been crazy."

Wendy Barr continued, almost as if she hadn't heard him, "I didn't expect anybody to help me. I've been in town two days and nobody would help me. I've tried everywhere to get a dog team and guide. But nobody would take me to Anton. They wanted to know my reason, and I wouldn't tell them. They said Anton doesn't like—unexpected visitors." She seemed very much troubled.

He had never seen a girl like this. Pretty as a picture, yet able to bust Klondike over the head with that chair. One minute helpless, and all-feminine—next, a fighting little fool.

In front of the Skagway Hotel she halted, spoke hurriedly.

"I'll tell you why I want to see Anton," she said. "He's got something that belongs to my mother and me. A map of a gold mine. My father discovered the mine. But he was fatally hurt in a landslide. The last words he ever wrote us, said Anton would keep the map safe for us—if Dad didn't get well." Her voice broke a little, and Carey guessed it hadn't been long since her father's death. Her blue eyes were filled with tears.

"But when we wrote to Anton he didn't answer," the girl went on. "I wrote many times, asking for the map. It didn't do any good."

Carey shook his head. He couldn't imagine anyone handing over a map of a goldmine to Olaf Anton for safe-keeping. But he didn't say this. He was watching the girl who had taken a photograph from inside her parka. She exhibited it, shakily.

"This was my Dad, Henry Barr. Everybody called him Hank," she said. "Wasn't he a fine looking man? Oh, why did he die—"

In the semi-darkness, Carey couldn't see a thing. But he said, "Sure, a fine looking man. You can see it right away."

"He was so kind," the girl said. "And so smart," proudly.

Carey thought, *he must have been smart—trusting Anton with the map of a gold mine.*

"That's why I've got to see Anton," the girl said. "My Dad died to find that mine. And he wanted Mom and me to

have it." She turned, touched his arm. "Please help me. Please take me there. You're our last chance. Can't you understand that?"

Carey frowned. He realized that what she said was true. He was her last chance. Nobody would dare take her to see Anton on such a mission. Nobody but Tom Carey, already so deeply up to his neck in trouble that a bit more could scarcely matter. Whipping Anton's captain, Klondike, had only plunged him deeper. His farm was lost, job gone. Lingering in town would compel McDowell to arrest him—a tough experience for both.

But he hesitated. Of all the fool errands to make this was easily the worst—bringing a chechako girl to Anton to demand her gold mine. Then his hesitation vanished. He barely repressed a grin. He was going to help her—and knew why. The reason made him feel awkward, embarrassed. No girl had ever affected him like this.

"Look," she was holding something out to him. "Here's the hundred dollars—in advance. Just as I said. *Please.*"

"All right," he said. "I'll take you."

He took the money said goodnight. As he walked off, Tom Carey glowed. No doubt about it. He had never seen such a girl. Wendy Barr certainly got what she wanted. Then he thought of what probably waited at the end of that crazy run to Mad Mountain.

His jaw set. Perhaps it was not too late. Perhaps fate was in this somewhere —would somehow give him one last chance to strike back at the man who had ruined him.

II

IN the chill light of daybreak slanting into the stable, Tom Carey stared angrily at his slashed harness. Remnants of traces and belly bands littered the floor. Fury, for a moment, held him motionless. That harness, complete with bells, had cost seventy-five dollars. He went to the foot of the ladder leading to the loft, and shouted for Joe Totem.

The aged Eskimo stableman emerged sleepily, sight of the ruined harness making his yellow skin pale. Black eyes regarded Carey fearfully. Questioning only elicited from him fragmentary answers.

"Joe Totem good boy," he mumbled. "Sleep damn fine. Never see nothing. All time sleep like hell."

In times past, Carey had befriended the old man and was forced to accept his statement. Joe Totem certainly remembered the night Carey had saved him from a beating by drunken miners. It wasn't likely he had done this.

Carey strode into the next room. But the dogs were safe, as was the eight-foot hickory sled overhead. Champ's big body —ninety-five pounds of lean muscle— shouldered through the pack. Foolhardy would have been the intruder who attempted to tamper with this team which was Malemute-bred, crossed with wolf.

Returning to the harness room, Carey saw something which in his anger he had missed. A scrap of paper nailed to the wall. Scrawled in chalk was a warning, *"Carey next time it will be yore throte so keep off the Mountin."*

He was studying it when the stable door opened. Carey shoved the paper into his parka. Wendy Barr entered. She was accompanied by her companion whom she introduced—Bert Driscoll. She emitted an exclamation.

"Why—why, look at your harness. It's cut to pieces."

Carey nodded glumly.

"Who on earth could have done that!" Instinctively her eyes turned to the squat Eskimo.

"Joe Totem not do," the stableman said worriedly. "Me damn nice boy. All time go Sunday School."

"I suppose that's revenge for last night," she said, frowning. "I've told Bert."

Driscoll nodded. "Sorry I missed it," and though Carey knew him for a chechako, he decided there was nothing soft about Driscoll. Cold, hard eyes, the set jaw strangely contrasted with his mail-order snow country rig.

"Get another harness," the girl was saying, "and coffee, beans, flour, bacon—anything else we'll need." She added, and it made Carey look up quickly, "We'll need cartridges—.38 for Bert, .25 for me. Smokeless," she specified, as if an afterthought.

He wondered at the smallness of that

last caliber but still more at what she produced from the knitted bag attached to her wrist. A Colt's automatic with a two-inch barrel. The over-all length was not more than four and a half inches. His guess was that it did not weigh over twelve or thirteen ounces. In a gunsmith's catalog he had seen it described as "neat, compact—a great favorite with the ladies."

"Nice isn't it?" she asked. "I never go anywhere without it."

He was beginning to have an odd conviction. Wendy Barr and her tenderfoot companion were not wholly what they appeared to be. The promptness with which she produced money for new harness and supplies confirmed the impression. Her means were more ample than might have been expected from a defrauded widow's daughter. Or maybe she was throwing her last resources into this wild-goose chase after a gold mine.

WHEN he returned with new harness, fitting the dogs into the hitch, Lieutenant McDowell appeared. To Carey's nod, the grizzled police officer gave a dour answer.

"Tom, you're the biggest damned fool in Alaska."

Carey bent over the singletree, assuring himself it was set sufficiently low.

"I heard where you was goin'," McDowell said. "I didn't believe it. A man in your mess stickin' his neck out again!"

Carey inspected the ash runners, mortised joints.

"Lost your job, goin' to lose your farm—and run out o' town," McDowell growled. "And now what? Runnin' smack into the face o' the man who beat you. Boy, you're askin' to be knocked off!"

Tom Carey stood up, gray eyes wintry.

"I'm askin' for another chance at Anton," he said slowly. "This is the only chance I see."

"Call this a 'chance'?" his friend snorted. "Carryin' two chechakoes to Anton to make trouble? I know about that girl. Her old man was Hank Barr. The fool thought he discovered a gold mine—then got laid out in a landslide. He was crazy!"

"You said it was Anton or me," Carey answered simply. "Maybe this time I'll get a break."

"Break, nothing!" McDowell cried. "Anton is boss o' that mountain. Out there he's the law. Once you get there nobody can help you. I'm warnin' you."

Tom Carey smiled. "Nobody could help me here, either. Maybe I am a damn fool, Mac. But if I help these people to make Anton pay off—then I'll feel better. I got a mean streak in me."

"You got a crazy streak!" and McDowell stamped out of the stable.

Their departure was watched by a knot of curious-eyed loafers. With the sled stocked for the three-day trip, the girl and Driscoll wore snowshoes as Carey ordered. He felt the scornful scrutiny of the onlookers. In times past, punching strong Sweepstakes contenders, Tom Carey had been cheered by crowds. But enforced fasting had made his team too lean. These same dogs once had pulled sixty pounds apiece. Now, run out of town, he was mushing starved dogs—with a tenderfoot crew. Times had certainly changed.

He picked up the thirty-foot rawhide whip. Someone approached him. Joe Totem, the stableman, speaking in a low voice.

"Other team go ahead. Watch out quick." He struggled to express himself.

Carey asked, "What other team?"

Joe Totem shrugged helplessly. "Joe Totem don't know. Mebbe Klondike. Mebbe Klondike team."

Carey thanked him. The team put their shoulders in, strained. The sled began to move. At the corner, he called, "Gee-*heughh!*" Champ lead off to the right. Behind he heard the jeers of the onlookers.

Maybe they were right; McDowell, too. Maybe Tom Carey was a damned fool, on a damned fool's mission. He would find out quickly—the hard way.

III

EVERYWHERE were signs corroborating the avalanche warnings. In the knife-sharp wind that swept the pass, Carey bent double. His eyes raked the drear landscape. It was winter's last cold spell, spring now not far away. Frozen stones and boulders were everywhere. Above, in the white mountains, Carey knew the avalanches, like bleak and giant dragons, were beginning to stir as they worked

down. Occasionally, his ears reverberated with distant boomings as of far-off heavy artillery.

The route led ever upward and he saw how his companions' heads turned at the cracking ice, snap and explosion of the commencing winter break-up. Unease, unrest was their reaction to the Northland's inward agitation. Carey knew the feeling. For twenty-six years he had seen the coming of the Alaskan spring; its convulsions still awed him.

Another sled, he realized, has passed this way—and but a short time before. The tracks were clearly visible. As Joe Totem had said, perhaps Klondike—hurrying to warn his chief of their coming.

In consideration of the girl and Driscoll, he held his team to a walk. When he suggested she ride, she refused.

"Not now," and her voice was curt.

Behind him, Carey heard their low murmurs. Because Wendy Barr affected him like no other girl he had ever known, Carey chafed. Her intimacy with Driscoll irked him. Together, they had come from Seattle. His best guess was that they were engaged. Yet no slightest hint of romantic interest showed in their relations. It was growing on him that theirs might be another kind of attachment. Exactly what kind, he didn't know.

When finally she took her place on the sled, he felt clumsy, heavy-handed, adjusting her furs. Her cool, "Thanks," brought his heavy flush.

All he needed to add to his troubles, he thought bitterly, was to fall in love with this girl.

With dusk's early coming, they halted. He unpacked the pup-tent, set it up with the sleeping-bags in the shelter of a grove of snow-drift spruce. Their meal he cooked on the kerosene stove. They ate without conversation, and it occurred to Carey that Wendy Barr's manner had changed. Gone was her impulsiveness of the night before. Preoccupation was in its place. Once, turning quickly, he saw her remove frowning eyes from him.

While he fed dried salmon to the dogs, Driscoll joined him. Carey was uncomfortably aware of the man standing there, silent, unmoving. Presently Driscoll's clipped voice commented on a fact Carey had already himself noted.

"Dogs pretty restless, aren't they?"

Carey admitted, "Might be the food. They haven't been eating regular."

"I noticed the big one—that lead dog," Driscoll said. "He keeps looking around, smelling the air."

Carey could have volunteered a possible explanation, but it was fantastic even to his own mind—and would sound like pure foolishness to this matter-of-fact stranger. He said nothing.

"I was wondering," Driscoll said. "I imagine you have some idea who ruined your harness."

Carey turned slowly, listening to the soughing of the wind through the frozen trees.

"Well," he answered, "it could have been Klondike—the breed I tangled with."

Driscoll nodded. "That's right. It could have been."

Carey had an odd conviction. That Driscoll was pumping him, that his explanation but partly satisfied Driscoll. Realization nettled him. At the other's, "I'm turning in," he merely nodded, aware of hot, angry feelings gripping him.

When the man was gone, Carey studied his team. Huskies are unlike any other dogs. No matter what the cross strain, the wolf predominates. They are dogs incarnate—with every instinct a dozen times intensified. Particularly, he watched Champ. The great leader continually raised his head—so high that his silouhette made a straight line from chest to undermuzzle. The black nostrils worked like agitated leather flaps.

FOR some time Carey stood there, puzzling. Most of the team was burrowing into the snow for the night. One, spirited after its unaccustomed hearty meal, grew playful. It bounced at Champ, striking his haunches. Usually, as if aware of his own great strength, Champ met such advances with dignity. A slap of his huge paw subdued the most foolish. Now his reaction made Carey frown. In a flash, the leader whirled on the other other. His teeth brought blood.

Unmolested now, Champ loped toward the turn in the pass three hundred feet ahead. Then he returned, nudging Carey with his black nose. Carey watched him.

"What's the trouble, son?"

The leader trotted toward the pass, again turned its head to regard Carey questioningly. Its teeth were bared.

It was dark now. Frowning, Carey turned back to the camp. He saw the others had crawled into their fur-lined sleeping-bags. He decided against disturbing them. He got his Army .38 from the sled, broke it to make certain of its readiness, returned to the dog. They went slowly up the pass, investigating.

He heard the creak of footsteps, cocked the revolver. His eyes raked the pass ahead. But he was mistaken about the direction. The man who emerged from a bilberry thicket came from Carey's rear. He stood there on snowshoes, shaking with cold and fear.

"Please to not kill me," Joe Totem said. "Me good boy. Not forget boss save me. Joe Totem save boss now."

Carey scowled, his gaze returning to his lead-dog. He noticed how Champ's teeth were still bared. But the leader, after a tentative sniff at the old Eskimo, again focused his attention on the pass ahead. What had aroused Champ, it was plain, was not the furtive approach of Joe Totem. Something else, as yet unexplained, was the cause.

"All day we walk like hell," the Eskimo was saying. "Plenty trouble come to boss quick."

Carey stared at him.

"Me hear talk in saloon," Joe Totem said. "Klondike in front of boss now. Other men come behind. Me move plenty quick get here. The Thunderbird fly fast —look out."

In simple English—that meant open war had come to the tundra. When the Thunderbird flew from the totem pole blood would flow. . . .

Champ's great head turned toward camp. In his preoccupation with Joe Totem's warning, Carey barely noticed the animal's movement. The first indication he had of someone joining them was a sharp, biting command:

"Drop that revolver!"

He turned, startled. Wendy Barr stood there, covering him with the pocket .25.

"I've been watching you. You and your scheming. You heard me—drop that gun!"

The viciousness in her voice convinced him. He did not release his revolver. But his great hands immediately elevated.

"Playing a pretty deep game, aren't you, Mr. Carey?" Her voice bit at him. "One minute a gallant knight, the next a traitor. You had the idea we were just a couple of suckers—didn't you?" Fury made the .25 tremble.

Carey found his voice. "You're being pretty deep yourself. I haven't any idea what you're talking about."

Scorn whiplashed the words at him. "Olaf Anton does own this country—doesn't he?" she mocked him. "It was a fine idea to cut up your own harness. You didn't think I'd be willing to pay for new harness, did you? You thought I'd be discouraged. When I wasn't—well you and your gang worked out another play. You'd stop me from seeing Anton all right—*once you got me out here in the open.*"

Carey's anger almost choked him. "Why, you little fool—"

"Fool?" Her laughter was wild. "You'll see how much of a fool! I figured you out, didn't I?" She tossed her head at Joe Totem. "I knew you were meeting this old penguin, didn't I? Now drop that gun. I'll show you who you're trying to cross up!"

ABRUPTLY, and even in this moment of fury, Carey's eyes went to Champ. The lead dog faced the pass ahead squarely. His hackles were up stiffly and he was snarling.

As sure as he stood there, Tom Carey was certain of two things. Around that turn in the pass Klondike or others of Anton's men waited. Joe Totem's warning, the dog's behavior, clinched that hunch. But he also knew that if he moved, this girl would shoot him.

"Look," he said. "You are in danger. Right this minute. You'll need me—"

"One," said the girl, "two—"

The whipping crack of a rifle stopped her. Carey felt the bullet whistle past his head. But he had also seen the gunflame in the pass. He ignored the girl, lowered his revolver—fired. A man's scream filled the pass.

Carey swung on her. "Go on, run for camp. I'll cover you."

She gaped stupidly.

There was another crash from the pass. Joe Totem recoiled like a man kicked in

the stomach. The breath gusted out of him. He fell in the snow.

"Move!" In his anger, Carey shoved the girl violently. She went reeling backward. He bent over Joe Totem. But Joe Totem was past all human aid. Cursing, Carey crouched—slammed lead up at the pass. Again he turned. The girl stood there.

"Run, you fool!" Carey yelled at her. "Do you want to be killed?"

The night leaped into forked and living flame, blinding him, slamming his eardrums with gun-thunder. Returning shot for shot, pushing the girl behind him, foot by foot Carey backed into camp. Joe Totem had been right. The Thunderbird had struck.

Bert Driscoll pulled the girl down behind the sled. If Driscoll had shared her suspicions, Carey's behavior appeared to end them. He thrust a cartridge box at Carey, raised up from behind the barrier —fired. Carey discarded the revolver, snatching up his Winchester. This kind of play was made for a rifle. He lay on his stomach, the gun at his shoulder, squeezing the trigger almost with loving care.

He had prayed for a chance to strike back at the powerful force which had ruined him. Though it was unlikely Olaf Anton was in that pass, Anton's men were there. Every bullet sent up there was a weight off Tom Carey's heart.

He said warningly, "They're going to rush us. Hold it."

The pass filled with red-orange flashes, around the sled snow-puffs leaping in the air. The dog team was howling in unison. A line of gun-flame began to work down the pass. For a minute, behind the sled, they held fire. Closer came the attackers, beating up the snow, powdery clouds rising redly in the glare of explosions. Overhead, twigs of spruce clipped off, showered them. A husky yelped in pain. The cookstove went *pluunk,* began to leak oil on Carey.

"Now," he said softly.

With the rifle fondly cradled, his trigger-finger began to work automatically. Beside him, Driscoll's .38 thundered. To the left, the girl's tiny .25 whipped in thin, metallic rhythm.

In the pass, the firing grew ragged. Men's voices shouted hoarsely. And still the three behind the sled pumped death into the night.

From the corner of his eye, Carey glimpsed the girl. Again he marveled at this strangest of all women it had been his lot to see. Wendy Barr was neither helpless nor hysterical but firing like a sharpshooter on a target range.

He had been blind. A great deal more was behind this trip than he knew. Wendy Barr and Bert Driscoll were the most efficient and capable of chechakoes Tom Carey had ever encountered.

Firing in the pass ceased. Over the cold darkness stillness fell. Powder-smell filled his nostrils. Again he could hear the wind whimpering through the spruce.

Driscoll stood up. "They're licked—"

From the pass a shot slammed. Driscoll cursed softly and dropped queerly on one knee. Carey heard the girl's cry of concern.

"It's all right," Driscoll muttered. "It's my leg."

Carey was too busy to note more. Once again he was filling the pass with his hail of death. But as the minutes passed, his shots alone sounded. And gradually he realized the truth. The shot that hit Driscoll was the last action of the enemy—they had quit for the night. Now there was only the ringing Arctic silence.

WHILE he kept the pass covered, the girl examined Driscoll's wound. And again Tom Carey was aware of her efficiency. She cut loose the trouser leg, made her examination. The bullet had gone clean through the outer edge of Driscoll's calf. She washed it with snow, from the sled took first-aid kit, cauterizing the hole. She bound it with quick, neat wrappings of gauze.

Driscoll protested that he could still fire a revolver. But the girl assisted him to the pup-tent and his sleeping-bag. He had lost blood and now even his remonstrances grew weak.

When she had finished, Wendy Barr returned to the sled, lying at Carey's side. The small automatic once more was gripped, held ready in her fist.

A half hour passed, and still no sign came from the pass. Once Carey heard the barking of dogs. It sounded far off.

It was probable that the enemy had had enough and was mushing on again. He was roused by the girl's voice.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

The meekness of that statement hardly mollified him. Her suspicions struck Carey as poor return for the mess he had gotten himself into, the trouble that would pile up once they arrived at Olaf Anton's Mountain.

"It's the second time you've saved me."

Nothing in his experience had prepared him for this girl. His daily life, as an Alaskan policeman and farmer, had been hard, realistic. Nothing had ever occurred to acquaint him with either subtle or devious ways. Women, as Carey knew them, cooked and kept house for their menfolks. They weren't all milk and honey one minute, then threatening to shoot you the next.

His answer was sullen. "Forget it."

"I won't forget it," she said eagerly. "I'll never forget it. I don't want to. Please believe me."

Despite himself, Carey thrilled. He realized that lying in the darkness beside him was the prettiest girl he had laid eyes on. He told himself he was a fool, but he began to relax.

"Forget it," he repeated. "Anybody can make a mistake. You were just worked up. As a matter of fact, maybe I shouldn't have taken this job. I'm only a hindrance to you. I arrested Olaf Anton a while back, and he ruined me for doing it."

He was astonished at what happened then. She reached out, touched his arm. Her voice was friendly and eager.

"I'll tell you why I'm worked up," she said. "I can't fail. I've got to reach Anton. I've got to reach him—and make it stick. It's my sworn duty."

Carey felt the wonder of that light glove on his arm.

"We're not what you think—Bert Driscoll and me," she said. "We're not tenderfeet. We're from the United States Land Office. We've come here to investigate Olaf Anton. For months letters have poured into the Land Office. Some anonymous, some signed. From people who accuse Olaf Anton of forging claims to their coal-fields and mines. Of intimidating them and driving them off. Now you understand why we're here."

CAREY'S surprise made him silent. Her words explained a great deal. A thought struck him, a sentimental thought.

"Then you aren't going there on account of your dead dad and your widowed mother." He said it almost regretfully. He had liked the idea that he was sticking his neck into trouble not only with the hope of saving himself but aiding two friendless women.

Her answer was immediate. "I am going there for that reason," she said clearly. "My Dad was killed in a landslide. He did write that he was leaving the map of a gold-mine with Anton. And the rest is true too—that Anton never answered any of my letters."

Carey breathed easier. He was glad of that. It made his fight against Anton somehow more worthwhile.

"It was because of my personal interest that the Office sent me with Bert," she told him. "Understand now?"

Tom Carey breathed deeply. Then he frowned.

"You've got a big job on your hands—even for a girl like you," he said. "Anton is the biggest man in Alaska. He brags that he's the only man ever to lick a mountain—and I reckon that's right. He owns most everything around that thing they call Mad Mountain. Looks like he's beaten its avalanches and volcanoes—and all the people on it too." He halted, and for still another time his gaze went to Champ who crouched beside him. He indicated the dog to the puzzled girl.

"See how he still snarls? Look at those hackles stand up." Carey laughed harshly. "All that shooting didn't make Champ act like that. I know my dog. I raised him on a bottle when his ma died. I know him like a book. He acts like that when something worse than men or guns is bothering him."

He felt her suspense, and knew what he was going to say would more than justify it.

"Olaf Anton is what's bothering Champ," Carey said shortly. "Olaf Anton isn't out here. I'd bet on it. But he's got ways of *reaching* out to places—even when he isn't there."

He laughed again, without mirth.

"While I was feeding the dogs tonight,

Driscoll tried to pump me. I understand why now—so that part's all right. A U. S. agent has got to suspect everybody, I reckon. Driscoll noticed how Champ here was uneasy. He asked me why. I didn't tell him—well, because it would have sounded pretty wild. But I'll tell you now. You ought to know."

Carey said quietly, "Olaf Anton is a Swede. He's got wild ideas. You'd figure that a man like that would have dogs—out in this country. And he has. His team beat mine in the All-Alaska Sweepstakes last year. And beat fair—I'm not kicking about it. But he's got *another* dog. It's not any team dog. It's an albino wolf. You don't see many. And you don't see many that's crazy—like his wolf."

She watched him, breathless.

"That's right," Tom Carey said. "A mad white wolf. It killed an Aleut once. Was on him before the Indian knew it. Being crazy, it doesn't fear a thing. It'll rush a man soon as look at him." He added, "And being white, it sort of blends in with the snow. It's hard to see. It could rush you when you least expect it."

He told her, "That's what I was wondering about when I saw Champ acting like this. Look at him now. Once he saw that wolf. He'll never forget it." He bent over, patted the dog. Momentarily, the animal ceased its snarling.

Carey said more cheerfully. "I belong in this country, Miss Barr. It looks like Anton's beat me. But I still got another chance. That's why I threw in with you—to get that chance."

Her hand was still on his arm, tighter now.

"Maybe together we can lick him," Carey said. "I'd like my job back and my farm. And you want your gold-mine."

Her quick, capable voice said, "And we'll get them too."

"Maybe so," Tom Carey said. "Maybe so. But after this, Miss Barr, don't trail me around with that snippy little pistol. I'm not used to having girls draw on me. Might be somtimes I'd have a job to do on my own."

The girl said sweetly, "Please call me Wendy. Then I'll know you do forgive me."

"All right—Wendy," Tom Carey said, and listened to the way it rolled on his tongue like an apple-dodger smeared with buckwheat honey. He hated to have her remove her hand. But he made her climb into her sleeping-bag. He was going to keep watch until morning.

IV

THE enemy was gone. The first streaks of daylight, a brief reconnaissance, showed that. He inspected the trampled snow in the pass, the ugly frozen blood-streaks. At the turn, it was a shambles. But the imprints of sled-runners and snowshoes faded away into the distance. The wounded and dead had gone with them.

Before the girl was up, Carey buried one of the sled dogs and Joe Totem. He was touched by the aged Eskimo's giving of life itself to warn him. Carey's befriending of Joe Totem—the rescuing of him from the hands of quarrelsome and drunken miners—had been a policeman's duty rather than a personal interest. But Joe Totem had considered it otherwise. Carey was particularly stirred now. Few there were in this country who would have dared, or even desired, to do Tom Carey a friendly act. With sincerity, he found a box slat to mark the icy grave, carving on it: *Joe Totem—A True Friend.*

When he returned, Wendy Barr held to her promise, asking no questions. As he prepared breakfast, she told him that Bert Driscoll's leg was in a serious condition.

Carey stuck his head in to see the government man. "We'll put you on the sled."

Driscoll's curt voice answered, "Sorry to trouble you." His hard, level eyes fastened on Carey's. "Miss Barr told you—about us."

Carey nodded.

"She says you're on our side."

Carey said, "That's right. I've been from the start."

All the agent said was, "Come when you want me," and Carey saw relief in his eyes.

When they broke camp—with Driscoll comfortable on the sled—Carey knew that two long days of heavy mushing lay ahead. He noticed how the girl instinc-

tively walked with him, rather than at Driscoll's side. His eyes filled with the trim figure in white parka, his Winchester now under her arm. The way she looked at him, her comments, told him the truth. He was no longer a hired, impersonal instrument of her plan. Something warmer was in her glance when she passed and read the grave-marker he had erected for Joe Totem.

It set him to dreaming of his doomed farm as the still, white-drifted miles went by . . .

At another time, such a trip would have been back-breaking. Mushing down into the valley now, it was less cold. The crash of falling ice increased. Couloirs were choked with strewn boulders. The roar of break-ups became incessant. But the lessening of the cold was not heartening, only ominous. Scanning the peaks, Carey could see vast ice-fields merging, swelling into avalanche proportion. Mad Mountain soon would lash out, as it did each year, at the pygmies who dwelt at its base.

Yet that menace and the realization that each mile was bringing him to closer grips with the man who had ruined him, did not depress Carey. The girl at his side filled his thoughts. He was thinking of the wrong Olaf Anton had done her. They passed through the valley, at last came to the bleak bare town of shacks and little farms where Olaf Anton was king.

His fist clenched on the gee-pole. The fight had come.

IT was a valley of fear. One after another, proprietors of houses, whose rough-painted signs offered *"BOARD AND KEEP—CHEAP,"* turned them away when Wendy Barr refused to disclose either her business or identity. Strangers, one wounded, found no welcome in Olaf Anton's domain.

Only the efforts of the community doctor, a peppery Scotchman—who appeared to enjoy the customary independence of his profession—finally secured them lodgings. He found three small rooms in the cottage of an Irish widow.

"Sure, ye're welcome," she nodded significantly at the doctor. "'Tis a black thing when a hurt man can't find shelter here. 'Twas not always so, before Olaf Anton owned this town."

While the doctor inspected Driscoll's wound, and put him to bed, Wendy discussed her plan of action with Carey. For the present, she would not reveal her identity of government agent but seek an interview with Anton merely as Hank Barr's daughter. It was unlikely that her request would receive much consideration but she wrote a short note and dispatched it by their landlady's son. This done, Carey unhitched his team in the stable, and began an inspection of the town.

Everywhere he seemed to detect evidence of Olaf Anton's iron rule. Few loitered on the street, but behind shuttered windows he realized that concealed watchers noted his passing. The saloon sign announced *"Olaf Anton, Prop.,"* but caution was no part of Carey's plan. He had come here for but one purpose—trouble.

His entrance attracted immediate attention. From a big table faro players looked up. At the bar two miners turned to regard him, their blackened faces intent. The bartender made no attempt to conceal curiosity. He set down the drink, his glance taking in Carey's worn outfit.

"Prospectin'?"

Carey nodded. "Prospecting."

The bartender shook his head. "Ain't been any pannin' round here in years. Nothin' left to work over."

"No harm looking." Carey's ears told him the card-playing had ceased. The whole saloon was listening. If he hoped for information, there was one possibility of getting it. "A partner of mine made out all right here once. Hank Barr. Ever hear of him?"

A glass slipped from the bartender's fingers, crashed to the floor. He was a big man and red-faced—yet now he looked sick. The two miners gulped their drinks, moved toward the door. The room was very still. The click of a falling chip was startlingly loud.

"Hank Barr," Carey repeated. "Hank hit it pretty rich here."

Behind him, a chair scraped harshly. A shrill, piping voice spoke.

"Hank Barr, hey? A-lookin' for pore ol' Hank, hey?"

Whatever result Carey had expected

from his query, his wildest dreams could not have anticipated this.

The man who had cried out looked less like a human being than some creature from the bowels of the earth. Grime and mud caked his small, bent figure. From cap to battered boots it covered him—discoloring the white hair that hung to his shoulders, thick wild beard that sprouted directly under his bright, popping eyes and flowed to his chest. Over one stooped shoulder he carried a burlap sack.

"Pore ol' Hank—dead an' gone," he intoned mournfully. "Who's a-askin' for Hank Barr?" Tears from the weak eyes blinking in the light. "None can harm ol' Hank no more."

The bartender obviously welcomed the interruption. He winked at Carey, tapping his head.

Carey was surprised at his own gentleness, "I meant no harm to Hank Barr's memory. I know his family.'"

The mole-like figure stared with childish solemnity.

"I could tell you 'bout ol' Hank," he said, adding with ludicrously comical emphasis, "could—but won't." His mouth closed with a snap.

"What's in the sack?" Carey asked amiably.

Instantly, animation filled the other. His eyes gleamed as his free hand patted the small sack.

"Nuggets!" he whispered hoarsely. "All of 'em's mine!" He edged toward the door, his head shaking foolishly. "An' none can take them off'n me! Damn their black, murderin' souls!"

When the door closed, the bartender explained, "That's Loony. Come here some years back. Lives up in the mountain. Comes down for handouts and to pick up old tincans. Don't mind Loony."

CAREY was not prepared for the next interruption. A man got up from one of the tables and walked toward him. In his twenties, he wore a miner's overalls and was built along the sturdy lines of a donkey engine. Carey's gaze went past him, and his lips set. The miner came from a table where sat Klondike. The Klondiker was scowling at Carey. His left arm was in a sling.

"I heard you askin for Hank Barr." The burly young miner halted in front of Carey.

"That's right," Carey said coolly. "Knew him, did you?"

The miner took a step closer. Carey straightened from his leaning position against the bar.

"You forget about Hank Barr," advised the miner.

Carey's eyes danced. "How's that?"

"Or—"

Carey swung first. It was his rule—whenever he saw an attack as unmistakably telegraphed as this one. This man was too big to fool with. Carey picked his target exactly—and was too close to miss. His fist smashed the chin, and the miner hit a table and sat down. Carey's hand dropped quietly on the gun-butt at his hip. His smile was thin, challenging.

"Nice quiet place you have here," he told the bartender.

Silence filled the room. The bartender stood frozen. The miner still sat on the floor, head in his hands. At the table Klondike watched Carey with hate-filled eyes. But he didn't get up.

With his left hand, Carey picked up his glass. He coolly drained it, set it down, nodded with a gesture that took in the whole room—the stiff, straining faces that were watching him.

"Hank Barr must have been quite a man—to cause all this rumpus," he said, and moved toward the door. He had come to town for trouble, he thought as he went out. Now he had found it.

As he walked back to the boarding-house, he saw a thin, starved-looking child staring at him from a window. The peaked little face touched Carey. Like some disturbing symbol it revealed the misery and fear with which Alaf Anton ruled this town huddled beneath Mad Mountain. Carey found a quarter in his pocket, thrust it at the child. Before the eager fingers could grasp the coin, something happened. From the shadowy recesses behind, a hand snatched the child from the window. He walked on, frowning. Olaf Anton had affected the lives of many besides himself.

It was dusk, a thin, fine snow beginning, when Carey reached the boarding-house. Wendy Barr's door was open and he thrust his head in. The girl stood at the win-

dow, back turned to him. At his knock, she whirled. He wondered at her expression of fright.

"Oh . . . I am glad to see you . . . Tom," she said, and took an impulsive step toward him. "I . . . well, my nerves are a little on edge." It was unusual—seeing her like that.

"What's the trouble?"

She drew him toward the window. "Look out there. Tell me. Do you see anything — well, *peculiar?*" She was pointing.

Carey looked out into the thin snowfall, gathering darkness.

"Look again," her voice insisted, and he thought he heard it tremble.

He stared silently, seeing nothing . . . only snow, thickening dusk. Then he stiffened. He blinked, under the impression that something was confusing his vision. He seemed to be staring through the snowfall at a far-off crude but gigantic death's-head. He saw the gaping, empty hollows of eye-sockets, nose, fleshless mouth. Then he swung around, slowly beginning to smile.

She was smiling, too. "Yes, I know what it is now. But it gave me a start when I first saw it."

Carey grinned. "It's Mad Mountain. Landslides have done that. They've made the hollows. But through the snow it looks—like something else."

A knock sounded at the door. Their landlady stood there.

"A man for you, Miss. Says he come with a message."

Behind her, Carey saw Klondike. The Klondiker returned his stare sullenly.

"Anton says you kin come," he said.

The girl paled. Carey saw it. Instinctively she turned to him.

"You bet," he said, nodding. "I'll go with you. I've been looking forward to this a long while," and she went for her coat.

Klondike stirred. "Anton didn't say nothin' about you comin'. You ain't wanted, policeman."

Carey said, "It'll be a little surprise." He indicated the Klondiker's left arm in the sling. "Hurt yourself?"

Anton's captain flushed, and Carey never doubted that he had been one of that attacking party in the pass. The Klondiker jerked his head at Carey's belt.

"Leave that gun behind. Anton don't like guns."

Carey answered dryly, "Don't get nervous, Klondike. Me and your boss are old friends. All we got to do is know each other better. And you're wrong. Anton likes guns fine. Don't kid me."

The girl delayed for a moment to tell Driscoll where they were going, whispering as she reappeared, "It's driving him crazy, just lying there."

But Carey's reaction was purely selfish. He hadn't forgot his earlier envy of Bert Driscoll's intimacy with her. Exhilaration filled him. Now it would be Tom Carey at her side when she faced Olaf Anton. Everything was working out right.

THEY followed Klondike through the bleak, darkened street from which dim lamps showed like weary eyes. But excitement, not depression, gripped Wendy Barr. He realized for how long a time, both as the daughter of Hank Barr, and as government agent, she must have envisioned this meeting with Olaf Anton. Officially, and for deepest personal reasons, success must now crown her efforts.

For a minute, Carey's own exuberance died. He saw himself for what he was—penniless, a homeless outcast. What right had he to aspire to the favor of a girl who might be heiress to a gold mine? A more realistic reflection followed. She might, as an agent for the U. S. Land Office, get the goods on Olaf Anton. Carey never doubted but that somewhere in that black record of oppression and defraudment there must be a chink in the Swede monarch's armor. Possibility that Anton would hand over Hank Barr's map to his daughter, was slim. Slimmer still, Carey thought, was the likelihood that there had ever been a gold mine.

They followed their guide out of town and up the lower snow-crusted slopes of the mountain. Now Carey saw the bright windows of Anton's lodge. Huge, warm with light, it mocked the hardship and squalor below, lording it over the hunched backs of shanties and blackened coal shafts. From its four stone chimneys smoke, in the cold night, swept low to the ground.

They entered the grounds through heavy

gates that Klondike swung behind them. Walking up the shoveled path, Carey felt Wendy Barr's glove on his arm. His head turned.

Parallel with the walk ran a high fence of barbed wire. Behind the wire something stirred. Carey's eyes strained.

The figure behind the barbed wire was hardly more distinguishable than a ghost. It was like a ghost that it drifted across the snow, silent, almost gliding. Suddenly it flung itself against the barbed wire—following them foot by foot. Fury undescribable drove it against that barrier again and again. Carey saw the head raise in the snowfall. A howl, almost human in its frustration, shivered his eardrums, chilled him.

He saw that the girl understood. It was Anton's mad albino wolf.

The lodge door swung back. A figure huge, towering, almost like something hacked from the mountain itself, stood there. A voice boomed at them, holding the thunder of an avalanche.

"Welcome to Olaf Anton's lodge!"

Anton stepped aside, and they walked in—Carey's ears ringing with the howling of that accursed beast out in the dark.

V

MASSIVE, almost herculean in his boots and mackinaw, Olaf Anton faced them. His back was to the roaring fireplace whose stonework pyramided to the high ceiling. His silhouette, all detail blacked out, looked more like a two-legged boulder than a man. He loomed hugely even against the great fireplace, the prize polar bear pelts stretched across the wall's giant redwood logs.

A rumbling order brought a hurrying Aleut servant with brandy decanter and glasses. One big hand picked up a glass. An echoing toast filled the room.

"To Hank Barr! And pay dirt for him on the other side!" With his own hand he refilled their glasses.

Tom Carey had expected almost anything except this hearty welcome.

He could have doubted his own senses. He had to remind himself that he had arrested this man, been broken for it. Standing in one corner was Klondike, bandaged arm proof of Olaf Anton's deadly hostility. And Tom Carey, Anton had ignored from the moment of their arrival. All the gigantic figure's attention remained riveted on Wendy Barr. Carey wondered how much of Anton's surprising reception was due to cunning, how much to the girl's attractiveness. But he didn't wonder long.

In the flames' rosy glow, she was a spectacle to stop a man's breath. After the cold, her cheeks were on fire; the yellow hair glinted like molten gold. For Carey, used to the harsh, continual fight against great cold, she was scarcely real. Her physical warmth was like some separate amazing thing.

He realized the effect on Olaf Anton—who possessed all his avaricious nature demanded, denying himself nothing. Did Anton now see, in the person of the girl he had defrauded, one more object of desire? His face was in shadow, but Carey felt the greedy eyes never left her.

"It is fine you come here," he was telling her. "Better you had come before. It is a long time you wait."

Carey grinned at the matter-of-factness that he had come to know so well. "I could have come before," she said crisply. "If you'd answered my letters."

The giant shadow stiffened. A roar of gargantuan laughter burst from it.

"It is true," Anton answered. "But for that you must not hate me. I am a busy man. My whole life is taken up—with the affairs of others. You have been in Alaska maybe only a short time. But already you hear of me." He struck himself on the chest. "Now you know I am Alaska's big man. They have told you. I am the only man ever to master a mountain. Now, perhaps, better you understand."

Wendy Barr said coolly, "My Dad trusted you."

Anton's answer was hearty. "Certainly he trusted me. Only to me did he come. After—" the great head shook ponderously—"his terrible accident. You see, he was not like Olaf Anton. The mountain did not do his bidding. It destroyed him. It must wring your heart to hear this."

In the silence that filled the room, after the dying away of that mighty voice, the girl sat stiffly. But she was not prepared for what Olaf Anton next said.

"Sometimes, struggling with this cruel and cold land, a man forgets life back in the States," he said. "Me, too—I forget. I see you now—and I realize how much I forget." His powerful arms flung out, as if to encompass the confines of his palatial lodge. "See, I have everything—but *nothing!* I live like a monk. What a palace this would be, if I had a wife."

Carey saw the color whip from her face, and felt his own fists doubling.

"A woman," said the Master of Mad Mountain tenderly. "Someone to share my empire with me."

Carey could feel the burning of those hidden eyes on the girl. Then Olaf Anton returned to reality.

"I will show you why you have not heard from me—why I answered no letters. When you see, you will admire me. You will realize the great heart of Olaf Anton. Before, I have not said to you a word—because I would not dash your hopes."

Wendy Barr said curtly, "I've come for that map."

Olaf Anton bowed. "And you shall have it. Klondike, *eugh!*"—he spoke to the breed as if he had been a sled dog—"bring the map!"

CAREY almost whistled. Evasions, excuses, defiances, threats—everything he had expected from the girl's mission but this. . . . The Klondiker obediently walking to a desk, pulling out a drawer—returning with a long envelope. Wendy Barr's face was gripped by excitement. Carey could almost hear the beat of her heart. Dreams and nightmares must have haunted her mind when it endeavored to anticipate this moment. Yet now here Olaf Anton came politely toward her—extending the answer to her wildest hopes.

"It is for you to open," he said gently. "The map is yours."

Trembling, Wendy Barr's fingers turned back the envelope flap, drew out the inclosed sheet of paper. Carey had risen, moving to her side. Yet in that moment of triumph, his eyes raised to Olaf Anton. The fire fell upon the rock-hewn jaw, short grizzled mustache, thin lips. Carey felt uneasiness. The expression on Olaf Anton's face contrasted strongly with his solicitious manner. Not friendliness was there—but triumph, so stark, malicious that it startled him.

He heard the girl's low exclamation.

"What is this—a joke?"

Anton shook his head—and with his face again masked in the shadows—it was as if pityingly.

"It is no joke—no," he said slowly. "Now maybe better you understand. My heart goes out to you."

Wendy cried sharply, "I don't understand anything. Either you're playing with me or—or you're crazy!" Anger shook her voice. "Why, this isn't a map—it's *nothing!*" She extended it to Carey. He scanned it.

The sheet of paper in his hand was yellowed, soiled. What Carey saw scrawled on it in ink made him frown. It was a crude drawing of a human skull. A line had been drawn halfway through the empty right eye-socket—increasing the macabre impression. It gave the skull the appearance of slyly winking. At the bottom, he read—*For my wife and daughter, signed: H. C. Barr.*

Carey raised his eyes. Wendy Barr sat upright, quivering with indignation. Olaf Anton's measured voice addressed her.

"You know your father's writing? It is there. And now you understand why I do not write. It is because I spend hours, days, months while I try to solve the riddle of that map for you. But I fail. Now you understand."

Carey had a strange conviction. Triumphant, Anton undoubtedly was. Yet something in the man's tone convinced him that now he spoke the truth. That, actually, he did not know the answer to this puzzle. He was as bewildered by it as they were.

"You do not know," Anton said slowly. "The landslide injured your father terribly. Only a few fingers he could move. To write more—impossible! Only like this—" he demonstrated— "could he make a few lines. Then. . . ."

Wendy Barr rose slowly. Carey saw what a blow had come to her hopes. With an effort, he realized, she controlled herself.

"Let's go now," she said to him. Her eyes were dull.

Olaf Anton spoke hurriedly, "You un-

derstand I try hard to help you. Now I see you, I am glad I try hard. For you, I try harder than for anybody. I look out for you." His hand went out as if to pat her shoulder but instantly the girl drew away.

The sheet of paper had fallen to the floor. Anton stooped, retrieved it—held it out.

"Take it. It belongs to you. Here—take it!"

Then another conviction, strong as his last, came to Tom Carey. It was probably true that Olaf Anton had not been able to read the riddle of that skull, scrawled by Hank Barr's fingers already stiffening in death. But Olaf Anton had made a copy of it. He would still study that copy. Carey would have bet on it. And if Anton solved it first—the girl would never see that gold mine.

THE girl accepted the sheet of paper, got into her furs. Carey noticed how she did it quickly, preventing Anton from assisting her. He realized that the giant's admiration revolted, rather than flattered her. In some way, he realized she saw even more deeply into the menace of this strange and power-crazed man, than he did himself. Saw something which made her fight off his slightest, most civil advance. She detested his feigned solicitude.

At the door, Olaf Anton bowed. Carey saw his face again, eyes dazzled with the girl's warmth, youth.

"I see you again," he said. "I do all things to help you. We become close friends. I—"

Wendy Barr's head inclined slightly. Then she passed through the door. As Carey started to follow, Anton's great hand checked him. He could not see the man's face, but heard his hard breathing. Olaf Anton's manner was hurried.

"I speak privately to you," he said. "Forget we have been enemies. Go back where you have come. I will see that you are reinstated in the police."

Carey stared.

"Leave tomorrow," Anton said quickly. "I make all right with you."

Carey's lips set. He could see what the sight of this beautiful girl had done to Olaf Anton. How jealousy now had him in its grip. It rode him like a devil.

"You are a dog-puncher," Anton hurried on. "Maybe you prefer to train sled dogs. Go back home. I will send you all my dogs to train. I pay you plenty." He halted, glaring at Carey.

Carey's head shook. "I'm not going home," he said coolly. "I'm staying here." His stare was level. "I'll be here—for some time."

He had not counted on Anton's reaction. The huge man instantly was convulsed with anger—so great that it choked him. Carey turned away, a hoarse whisper rasping at him through the dark.

"Tomorrow. Go—or I tear you apart!"

Carey laughed as he went down the steps and rejoined the girl. They walked past the barbed-wire fence, through the wooden gate. As they strode silently down to town, Wendy Barr suddenly touched his arm. She had moved closer.

Carey saw what she meant. A grotesque figure was approaching them, bent half-double with a sack on its shoulder.

"Nuggets! Nuggets! An' all mine!" croaked the strange figure as it went by. "Damn their murderin' souls!"

She halted to watch it disappear up toward the mountain.

"That's Loony," Carey explained. "He picks up old tin cans believing they're gold. He's perfectly harmless."

Suddenly, she leaned against him, was in his arms. He felt her quivering, sobbing body against his own—and tears wet on her cheeks. A great sympathy swept over Tom Carey. He realized how long this slip of a girl had looked forward to tonight. Now she had come to defeat. And, in her moment of bitterness, it was to Tom Carey's arms she had turned.

It was hard for him to despair with her, his own heart was so full.

VI

CLOUDS, heavy with rain, scudded before the wind when Carey woke. In the gray morning he rose, fed the dogs. His nose wrinkled. Smell of glaciers was in the air—wet, dank, as of icy standing water. His eardrums trembled with a curious vibration. The warmer weather was working havoc up there on Mad Mountain.

For a moment Carey turned to the com-

forting ground noises—dogs snuffling their food, somewhere a rooster's crow, the greedy grunting of a pig.

Then a shadow fell on the stable wall.

As Carey came erect, the shadow leaped spasmodically. Something whizzed through the air—and instinctively, he ducked. For a split-second, he stared at the quivering hatchet now embedded in the wall. Then he whirled, his .38 out. But the stable door was empty.

He eased toward it. As he did so, he saw a man running—dive into a group of shanties, disappear. It happened that quickly.

Tom Carey checked himself. Pursuit, he realized, would only be a wild-goose chase. His would-be murderer had vanished. He had not expected Olaf Anton's deadly persecution to commence so quickly. From now on he would be on guard. He had better be. . . .

He passed Bert Driscoll's room, hearing the murmur of voices. Wendy would be with him, reporting the result of her meeting with Anton. Together, they would be planning their official investigation for the Land Office. Carey found his snowshoes, set out for town. Work of his own remained to be done.

Four hours later, he had to admit failure. Most of those questioned fearfully drew off without answer of any kind. Two who did reply to his queries—Driscoll's peppery Scotch doctor, and a half-breed squaw who was hauling firewood on a sled—left him no better off than before. Neither knew of any local landmark which might have been indicated by Hank Barr's macabre sketch. Mention of the name of the dead prospector touched off the doctor's ire. He was apparently the only man in town who dared raise his voice against Olaf Anton.

"After Barr's accident, he was taken to Anton's lodge," the doctor said. "I'm never called up there. Anton's never had any use for me since I compelled him to make medical provision for his miners. No—I know nothing about Hank Barr. Nothing except that he prospected around here for several years."

On his return to the boarding-house, Carey again missed death by a split-second. He was crossing an open stretch when one of his snowshoes tangled, and he fell. As he hit one knee, he heard the rifle-crack, whipping on the warm wind. A puff of snow leaped from the path. He slid his revolver out, eyes searching the bleak, bare scene. But he saw nothing. His ambusher had used smokeless powder. Any of the line of alders far to Carey's right, could have furnished shelter for a gunman.

Anger filled him; and uneasiness. This could not long go on. Twice, he had been amazingly lucky. Next time. . . .

He arrived at the boarding-house, and Wendy Barr's voice called him. She was in her own room, at a table. Her father's sketch laying before her. As she raised her blue eyes, he knew that last night's occurrence had been more than impulse. Her cheeks were warm with color as she greeted him. He took her hand.

She indicated the drawing. "I can't get it out of my mind," she said. "Dad meant this drawing to tell Mom and me something. If you had seen his letters, you'd understand how much he loved us." It's that I feel he tried so hard, at the end, to make us understand."

Carey stood at her shoulder, looking down at the dead man's puzzle.

Frowning, he turned his head toward the window. Through the gray light, he saw Mad Mountain. Here Hank Barr, deceased, had sought his fortune. Here, he had met his death. Here was locked his secret. . . .

CAREY felt his body grow rigid. His eyes riveted on that mountainside, now laden with its deadly burden of untold tons of ice. All at once he had a strange desire to laugh. For now much was clear to him. He realized that this room in which they stood, the boarding-house itself, occupied an isolated position. No other view of Mad Mountain would be from quite the same angle. And the last piece of the puzzle slid into place. No wonder none of those others—even Olaf Anton—had read the riddle of Hank Barr's drawing.

"Look," Carey said softly, and took her hand.

Wonderingly, she turned. Her eyes went to the window. For a moment, without seeing, she gazed at the bleak,

white side of Mad Mountain. Then, with an intake of breath, she rose.

"Oh," she said quiveringly.

And Carey smiled. For now she saw what they had seen the evening before—those hollows and couloirs in the mountainside that made a crude but recognizable death's-head against the snowy-white background. And as her eyes went from the window to the drawing, she saw, even as Carey did—the huge rock overhang that gave to the right eye the curious appearance of being half-shut and winking.

That was where Hank Barr had made his stake. The clue almost shouted at them!

For several moments silence filled the room. The girl, hushed with the greatness of their discovery. Carey, quiet now that the full significance had hit him. Out there on Mad Mountain's tumultuous bosom, was Hank Barr's legacy. For all they knew, it meant a fortune.

Just for an instant, Carey winced. He saw himself, penniless, hunted by a powerful enemy. He thought of Wendy Barr, with wealth, security. Inside him something hardened. Now, he realized, he would never ask for her love—nor take it. Never with the circumstances like that. Then he realized she had turned, was looking at him. A question was in her eyes, as on the night before.

Carey nodded. "You bet. I'll go up there with you."

"When?" her voice was eager now, vibrant like a child's.

He frowned. "Maybe we'd better wait. That mountain's going crazy pretty soon. The ice—"

She came toward him, pouting like a little girl.

"Please."

He grinned. "All right. Tomorrow, we'll see. I'll get rope. We might need it."

His preoccupation was complete as he left and began the trip to town. Then he roused himself, remembering the two attempts made on his life.

Two men standing before a saloon straightened. Carey saw that one was the town constable — a white-mustached old-timer. He came toward Carey, lawman's shield exposed on his mackinaw.

"Just a minute."

Carey halted.

"Put your hands up," the constable said, and now Carey saw his right hand resting on a revolver butt. "Stand still. I'll take that gun."

Carey began, "Look here—"

"Easy," said the constable. "This is an arrest. You can't come into this town and fight in saloons. This town is run by law."

Under that gun, Carey had no choice but to obey. He raised his hands, saw the constable take his .38. Fury possessed him. It was redoubled by the sight of Klondike standing in the door of the saloon, watching sardonically. And the truth came to Tom Carey. One way or other, they had gotten him. The easiest way.

"This is Anton's doing," he said angrily.

"March," said the constable, jabbing him with his own gun. "To the lock-up."

Ten minutes later Tom Carey was shoved behind the iron bars of the jail's one room. The door slammed, was padlocked. The constable blew out his lantern, started off. Then he spat on the mud floor.

"In case you're wondering," he said, "you'll be here some time. Court don't open till July. You got quite a spell to be thinking up your story."

AGAINST the small grilled window, day was blotted out. Pitch-black darkness filled the cell. Long ago the constable had left, and the wood-stove fire had gone out. In his time Carey had jailed many others; never wholly without sympathy. Now he knew, himself, the helplessness of their predicament.

The ridiculous ending of his fight with Olaf Anton galled him. He told himself a gunfight would have been preferable. He thought of Wendy Barr, flushed with eagerness for their expedition—waiting. . . . He thought of the absurd ease with which Olaf Anton twice had beaten him, the casual heed which Anton would give to word of his arrest. He even thought of his dog team waiting in the stable for their evening meal.

Shame was an unusual sensation for Tom Carey. He had come here to fight —and they had locked him up like a tramp.

Many times during the night, he tried the door. The bars had been fixed in

poured concrete bases. The window was too small to permit the passage of his body even had he been able to loosen the grill—which he wasn't. Cold air coming through the window chilled him to the bone. The mud floor numbed his feet.

He sat on the wooden bench, listening to the far-away rumble of the ice in the mountains. It was like his own raging spirit.

Night was half-gone when he woke uneasily. He stood on the bench, peering through the window. Something stirred outside. He could hear it pacing with odd, swift movements below him, out of sight. He frowned. No human made that sound. It was an animal. Now it trotted into full view, sitting on its haunches and regarding the window.

Carey snorted.

"Champ."

The big leader raised its head. Carey couldn't repress a grin. When his feeding hour had come and passed, Champ had gone out to find the hand that usually fed him. It was typical of the Malemute that he wasted no time whining, but sat there waiting for Carey to join him. Carey almost felt Champ's perplexity when this did not occur.

The great animal walked slowly toward the wall. He was immediately below the window, but out of Carey's sight. Carey heard him scuffing and sniffing at the wall. Then he froze to attention. A shower of slush splattered within Carey's sight—another. He heard a dull, thumping sound. He understood now. The wall was keeping Champ from joining his master. So Champ was clawing under the wall.

Carey's heart leaped—but instantly sank. Such a hope was ridiculous.

He stepped down from the window, trying to put that fantastic possibility out of mind. Soon Champ would grow discouraged, quit. He waited, sweating. After a few minutes, he went to the window. He was startled at the mound of freshly dug snow. It had darker smears, as if Champ had dug down to earth. He warmed with the thought. But Champ ceased digging, walked into sight and sat down—staring pantingly up at the window.

Carey thought quickly. The jail could not be much more solidly built than any of these shacks. He knew Champ's strength. The dog had paws and claws of a bear. He made a decision—the only one at hand.

"Come, boy," he said through the bars "Here, Champ!"

The dog leaped for the wall, and out of sight again beneath the window.

Carey sat on the bench, head in his hands—trying not to think.

Ten minutes later he returned to the window. The size of the mound awed him. Again, as he stood there, Champ moved into view. His panting was ragged.

"Here, boy!" Carey said. "Come, Champ!" and left the window.

He got down on his hands and knees, shoving the bench from the window. He had his pocketknife and began to dig at the floor. It was mud, but packed mud. His fingers were blistered and raw before he even had made a start. He dug, gouged, clawed the earth. It was softer, as he got down a couple of feet. But he refused to be encouraged yet. The dog might quit. Or their tunnels might not meet. Another realization roweled him. The cell was growing lighter; dawn had come.

At any minute now, he realized, the digging dog out there would be seen.

Twice he went to the window, saw the dog emerge to stare wonderingly at him. Mud covered Champ's muzzle and chest. Saliva dripped from his jaws. Carey saw the torn and bloodied paws. Each time he had to steel himself to repeat, "Here, boy! Come, Champ!"

AN hour and a half later, the mud crumbled suddenly under his hands. A bloodied, mud-caked black nose thrust itself up out of the earth at him. For a minute the dog's excitement made further work impossible. He snuffled and blew like a geyser of dirt.

He was shaken, sweat-dripping, when at last he had an opening. It was broad daylight before he had widened the hole sufficiently to enable the passing of his body. But it was as he had half-guessed. The jail had been built directly on the ground, save for log foundations. He went under one now, twisting, straining, scratching against the rough ax-hewn sides.

When he was outside, Champ tottered toward him. Carey fondled him. Then

he hit out across the back of the settlement, floundering without his snowshoes, almost exhausted. What would Wendy Barr be thinking of him—disappearing the instant they had learned the probable location of her mine?

But a half hour later she was filling him with hot coffee, bacon and eggs—only relief in her expression.

"What you need now is sleep," she squeezed his hand when he had finished his story.

He shook his head. "We're starting for that mountain now. They'll be discovering I'm gone any minute. We'd better find your gold mine quick. I came here for a sock at Anton. Here's my chance." He smiled. "Come on."

VII

EVERYWHERE they encountered increasing signs of an avalanche—loose stones, the loud reports of icicles snapping off in a gale that blustered through the pass. A glacier's snout had rooted up the earth and far underfoot they could hear the groan of that trapped icy river. Now the air quivered without let-up; their own exertion pounded their hearts.

Alternately, they trudged through dark-blue, freezing shadow then into glaring sun-lit patches where the spring sun made the snow dazzling and filled the air with millions of glittering particles. They stopped to rest and Carey peered down into the valley. He could still see the four great chimneys of Olaf Anton's lodge. He sobered. Whatever the girl and himself found up here, one end to their trip was certain. He would be arrested immediately on his return.

But if he helped her find the mine—then he had got in that one last blow at the man who had ruined him. He was satisfied.

Once they saw the gathering avalanche—far above them and to the north. It sprawled on its belly amongst the peaks like some fabulous dragon. Then they were feeling their way through the passes again, the crouching gray monster of the mountains hidden from view. It was three hours before they reached their objective.

As they halted for breath on the plateau, Carey looked at the girl and admiration, wholly apart from his love of her, filled him. Few women, he would have wagered, had undergone so much to reach a goal. She turned, smiled at him—then they went on.

Suddenly, they came upon the "winking right eye." Carey stared at the huge hollowed-out area, the rocky overhang that distinguished it. Abruptly the girl moved toward him. Somebody had emerged from the hollow and stood waiting for them.

Carey released his instinctive grip on his Winchester. It was Loony. Loony, standing there, bent and mud-smeared, ragged and whiskered—blinking in the sunlight like a rooted-out ferret. He shouted shrilly at Carey, dancing up and down.

"Come for the bones of pore Hank Barr, hey? Pore ol' Hank—dead an' gone!"

Carey took the girl's arm and approached.

"Loony, this is Hank's daughter," he said gently. "She's looking for Hank's gold mine."

The sourdough regarded them sorrowfully. "Pore ol' Hank," his cracked voice repeated. "Dead an' gone them many years. Damn their black hearts!"

The girl gazed only fleetingly at the hermit, then averted her eyes. Carey sympathized with her. Dirt, poverty, neglect had made Loony scarcely a recognizable human being.

He raised his finger to his flowing beard, beckoning mysteriously. They followed, Wendy staying close at Carey's side. His burlap sack lay in one corner of the cavern and Loony shook it at them. Carey heard the rattle of tin cans.

"Nuggets!" Loony chuckled. "An' all of em's mine!"

Carey's eyes were searching the cavern, and he felt his breath tightening. He saw ragged blankets, a rusted stove, picks and pans—and a small battered wooden trunk. Its imitation leather surface was peeling. But he clearly saw the faded initials on its side—*H. C. B.* And Wendy saw them. She was frozen in an attitude of wonder.

Loony was talking, "I could tell ya plenty. Could," he said with the same childish petulance Carey remembered, "but won't."

In the rear of the cavern Carey saw

something which made his heart pound. Digging had been done back there. Earth and rock were piled high. As his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness, he thought he saw dull-yellow glints in the heaped-up earth. He was about to approach closer, when an exclamation from Wendy made him halt. He turned.

CHAMP trotted into the cavern. The dog, remembering his disappearance the day before, had followed him. He nudged Carey uneasily, persisting till Carey ordered him to lie down.

Then Carey returned to his examination of the digging. He leaned the Winchester against a boulder. Wendy stood over him as he knelt. Loony regarded him with dull interest. Carey scooped up a handful of the earth, and suddenly he knew the truth. Wendy Barr had found her gold mine. It was here.

He rose slowly, sober now that the miracle had happened. Hank Barr had really made a strike. The sample in Carey's hand indicated it almost beyond question.

For an instant they stood there, filled with the excitement of it.

Then a voice broke in on their thoughts. In the echoing confines of the cavern, it came at them from no particular location—as if out of nowhere.

"At last I find you! I look for you everywhere—and here you are! Now I am glad I give you the map. Maybe I should have given it to you before. I was a fool not to realize that maybe you would have the clue."

Olaf Anton stood at the mouth of the cavern. Behind him were ranged Klondike—and three Aleuts, each with a rifle unslung.

Anton said to the girl, "You see I keep my word. I look out for you. This morning I find my beautiful white wolf has escaped. I look everywhere to warn you. Somewhere here in the mountain the wolf runs loose!"

Carey's reach for the gun was quick, but not quick enough. Klondike's revolver covered him.

"Leave that alone!" Anton snapped at him. "For you I care nothing. We cannot keep you in the lock-up? So! There is a better way to handle you!"

He turned to the girl. "But we two will talk. We have much to talk about. It is wonderful it is all true. Now we have a gold mine—you and me!" His eyes glistened.

The abrupt change from joy to dread was too much for Wendy Barr. She stood transfixed, starting eyes on the booted, mackinawed giant.

Carey's ears turned to the sounds outside, the snap and crackle of the breaking-up ice. Not less fearful than that mountain avalanche to come was the smouldering of Olaf Anton's anger. Carey felt it as a gathering cataclysm.

Wendy Barr broke the silence. Her voice was steady, and Carey realized that once again she had met a challenge.

"What are you talking about?" she asked curtly. "We think we've found my Dad's mine."

Anton's ponderous head nodded clumsily, like a trained bear's.

"You have nothing to do with us," she continued sharply. "I'd appreciate it if you'd get those men out of here. I don't need you to take care of me—as you call it. I'll look out for myself. Clear out."

A fleeting expression of admiration crossed Anton's flattened face. Her words appeared to amuse him.

"But my white wolf," he began softly. "I have to tell you. The animal is mad. It is a killer."

Wendy Barr said coldly, "If we see it, we'll shoot it. Now you ought to be satisfied. Please go."

Olaf Anton shook his head, eyes not amused now but hard.

"No," he said. "I stay. I must remind you. You have no filed claim here. Your father died before he could file the claim."

CAREY could not wholly convince himself that the man lied. As on that night at the lodge, some inexplicable note of confidence tinged Anton's voice. The girl's face had fallen. She was watching Anton from suddenly crestfallen eyes. Then she took a breath. Carey saw the familiar set of her lips.

"All right," she said. "I'll check on that. If Dad didn't file claim—then I will. *Now.*"

Anton raised one huge furred paw.

"Wait," his voice was harsh. "First,

we talk. Here is a mine. There is no claim filed—yet. The gold is here. But it is *anybody's* gold. Many times in Alaska it has been like that. A gold strike—and many claimants." His tone became incredulous. "You are a child. You don't understand. When the situation is like now—then the mine belongs to the strong!"

He waved his hand at the four armed men behind him. "See, it is like I tell you. You have no chance. The claim is mine. Nobody can stop me!"

Anger flushed the girl's face.

"Only one thing can stop me," Olaf Anton said, and now his voice changed. Big, heavy, its stubbornness was quickened by a curious eagerness. Studying him, Carey saw the eyes grow moist, greedy.

"Only one thing, he repeated. *"You."*

Her eyes widened.

"It is like I told you." Olaf Anton patted his chest. "Here I am master. You have seen. I am rich, powerful. I have all things in my lodge—except one. We make a bargain. You marry me and we divide the mine. It's a bargain."

He had moved toward her, his big paws out-thrust, his eyes now blazing with passion. His lips twitched, as if in hunger.

Carey heard Wendy's cry of anger, "You fool!" and one mittened hand slapped across Olaf Anton's face.

Anton stepped backward and the change was awesome. Fury flooded features with congealed blood. His mouth was distorted, snarling.

"You refuse me," he muttered. "I'll show you—"

"I don't need your bargain," the girl snapped. "I know all about you. I know enough to put you in jail. I don't care how big you are." She laughed scornfully. With a single movement, she flung open her parka. "Here's something a lot bigger than you are!"

Her government shield was shoved under Olaf Anton's eyes.

He stared, as if thunderstruck. The exact meaning of that official identification escaped him—whether it signified law officer or otherwise. Only the government emblem was unmistakable—and its implied threat. Then his surprise seemed to vanish. His face was set as if in stone.

"I didn't know," he said slowly. "That changes a great deal. It is all different now. So you know enough to put me in jail, eh?" His mouth set like a steel trap. "I will show you."

Carey knew that the girl had made a mistake. He saw that she also realized it. She was no longer a mere obstacle to Olaf Anton's possession of a gold mine. That shield made her a deadly menace in his life. Anton's head turned to his men. And instantly Wendy darted past him, racing for the cavern's mouth.

"Run!" Carey shouted—and leaped at Anton.

But he was too late. He had a confused impression of figures rushing him, of the girl's startled cry—even of Loony suddenly diving into the rocks like a frightened snow-ferret. He struck out once, felt human flesh under his fist. Then a blow caught him over the head. He stumbled across the rocks, clawing at support, with his legs twisting weirdly under him. Then he fell.

He was not out, but stunned. It was as if he were drunk or dazed, with no true realization of what was happening . . . sound and sight rolling up into a meaningless nightmare, the world around him spinning and dipping crazily as his head fell upon his chest. . . .

BRITTLE popping noises like miniature fire-crackers filled Carey's ears. Automatically, it roused him. But the sound persisted even when his eyes began to focus. Gradually, the truth dawned. The noise was not in his head but outside. It was the breaking-up of the ice, louder now than ever before.

He lay on the floor of the cavern, his arms bound behind him with rope. At the cavern's mouth stood Klondike. A revolver was in his hand and he was listening to the tumult of the mountain.

"Hell's comin'," the breed was muttering. "Won't take much to start it movin'. We better get out afore—" He turned, regarding Carey with a scowl.

"You might better died," he snarled. "You'd saved Anton the trouble."

Carey's aching head slowly cleared. Wendy had disappeared. Anton and the three Aleuts had gone after her. Dully he realized that Loony and Champ also were gone. His mind clung to the girl's

fate. Had she escaped—or had they captured her?

"Anton'll catch that fool girl," Klondike jeered at him. "She was crazy to show him she was a gov'ment spy. Anton's been on the lookout for them for quite a spell. She won't trouble nobody any more. Not when he gets his hands on her."

He returned to the cavern, straddled a rock, facing Carey. The revolver rested on his sling.

"You started to hell that night you arrested Anton," the Klondiker went on. His single eye darted to the cavern's mouth as he talked, as if conversation helped keep his mind off what was happening up on those tortured peaks. "This is the end for you, policeman."

Carey's bitter thoughts were not for himself but the girl. Where could she flee on the slippery sides of this mountain? He strained at the rope bonds.

The Klondiker laughed harshly.

"I wish you would bust loose outa there." His eyes narrowed. "I wanted to put a hole in you ever since you busted me with that table. I almost got you that night in the pass. I been waitin' for the chance."

Carey shivered—but not at the promise of death in the other's words. His back was against a tunnel-mouth, and cold air chilled him. His brain raced with Wendy's fate, dread freezing him. While he lay there what was the girl doing?

"Nobody can beat Anton," Klondike scowled. "He's the biggest man in Alasky. Beat this damn crazy mount'in, didn't he? Who got the coal out o' here? Who's all them rats down in the valley slavin' for?" He laughed. "You're sittin' on a gold mine. But who's gettin' it? Not you, or that fool gal, neither—"

He checked, grinning. "You heard that—they caught her now!"

Carey's heart convulsed, sweat drenching him. He had heard it all right—a girl's scream whipped down the wind. They had found her. . . .

He shoved to a sitting posture, anger shaking him. His guard raised the revolver mockingly.

"Go on," he taunted. "Git up so I got the excuse. I told you. I'm itchin' to blast your brains out."

Carey's ears strained. But now he heard only the crackle and boom of that gathering avalanche.

Minutes passed . . . clammy fear for the girl filling his whole being. Desperately, his gaze sought some means of escape. There was none. Squarely before him sat Klondike. Carey never doubted that the man merely asked the chance to kill him. Now he found himself praying. Even another scream would tell him Wendy still was alive. Despair stupefied his senses. His teeth ground in desperation.

Then slowly his body relaxed.

Something had stirred behind him—in the narrow tunnel. His ears had detected its slithering movement. The dulled sound was repeated. It was as if a body at his back was dragging itself nearer, nearer . . . from out of the very bowels of the mountain. Carey's eyes raised. Klondike's head was turned to the cavern's mouth. The snapping-off of the ice out there had prevented his hearing anything else.

Carey started.

His wrists, bound behind him, had felt the clawing of unseen, long-nailed fingers, And it came to him that he knew who was back there . . . moving in the dark, like a mole. He felt those fingers, like mice, run over his back—settle down at the rope's end. The rope was knotted at Carey's wrists. And the hidden fingers began to work at the knot.

He wondered that Klondike did not notice the slackening of the rope bonds. But Klondike's alarm for the gathering avalanche was increasing, blotting out thought of all else.

"Time to get out," he mumbled. "Hell's comin' down off this mount'in. There better not be no shootin'. I seen a shotgun start a landslide oncet. . . ."

Carey felt the sawing at the knots now. The rope broke—and he barely grabbed the ends as they fell away. He was free, and he knew who had freed him. But without a weapon to use against Klondike's revolver, how could he hope to. . . .

He felt a large rock thrust into his right hand. He had a weird nightmarish feeling of being served by some ghostly and unfailing attendant.

"Hell's comin'—" began Klondike.

He was never to know the accuracy of his prophecy. For in that instant Tom Carey leaped up, the rope falling from his body. Klondike spun, fired. But it was hurried—the bullet shattering the rock over Carey's head. And Klondike never got another shot. The rock left Carey's hand.

It smashed the Klondiker full between the eyes. He grunted, toppled over on his face. Tom Carey jumped over him. He was halfway to the cavern's mouth, when he remembered Klondike's gun. He snatched it up. The man was dead, face-down in his own blood. Over his body danced the jubilant figure of Loony. He was rattling his sack of tincans.

"The nuggets is mine!" he was croaking. "The nuggets is mine! Damn their black, murderin' hearts!"

At that moment, Carey reached the cavern's mouth. He heard a woman's scream. It seemed to come from somewhere below him. He stumbled to the edge of the plateau, peered down. He beheld a spectacle that whipped all blood from his face.

VIII

ON the narrow cliff below Olaf Anton stood, gun in hand. He had cornered Wendy at last. He was walking toward her—and step by step, the trapped girl was backing toward the cliff's edge. No longer did she have a choice of marrying Anton or losing her mine. Now death was in her face and at her back—she had nowhere to turn. The three Aleuts were watching stolidly.

As Carey rose, he floundered in the snow. Then he cursed. He had dropped the revolver. It vanished into space.

He gauged the situation. While but twenty feet or so below him, in reality the cliff was much farther away from where he stood. To reach it, he would have to follow the slope to his right—a distance of several hundred feet. Wendy would be dead by then. And now he was unarmed. Even if he jumped without breaking his leg, they would shoot him when he fell. Fear raced his thoughts.

His eyes rested on a boulder. It jutted out over the cliff. Then the idea came to him. He turned, ran back into the cavern. He found the rope, while Loony watched him from wide, uncomprehending eyes. Instantly, Carey saw the rope would be far too short. He cursed bitterly.

His glance fell on another rope, and he leaped for it. He groaned at its aged, frayed condition but knotted it to the other piece. He made a loop as he raced back to the plateau. He slid the loop under his shoulder, securing the other end around the boulder. He estimated the length. When he swung, he should just clear the cliff.

He was floundering out to the rope's end, when he glanced below. Now the girl stood on the very edge of the cliff. A couple of steps more and it all would be over. Carey's face set in realization of the futility of what he was going to attempt. The rope would break. Or Anton would shoot him in mid-air like a snow goose. There wasn't a chance in the world of saving her.

He had the rope pulled taut now. And in that instant, he stiffened. His eyes steadied with what they saw.

On the slope below, something had happened. From out of the snow stole a lean, white figure, ghosting toward the group on the cliff. Carey's breath died as he saw it. It was Olaf Anton's mad wolf.

The Aleuts had seen it. One turned, saw the approaching animal, shouted to his companions. One dropped his rifle. Then all three began to scramble down the cliff. At the first shout Olaf Anton swung around. Now he saw the wolf, took a step backward. Then he began to fire furiously, as if himself mad with fear. His shots were all wild. Suddenly, Anton broke and ran—still firing. The shots seemed to shake the very mountain-tops, shuddering the air.

The wolf came down the slope, running square for Wendy Barr. She screamed, and it struck Carey's ear-drums—wild and piercing.

Then a final touch of horror was added to that terrible scene. From the snow-drifts sprang a powerful, furred figure. It hurled itself squarely in the path of the crazed wolf. And at sight of it, Tom Carey's heart pounded. It was Champ. The lead dog had finally found his mortal enemy.

It was the one break Carey needed. In

that instant he reached the rope's end—and jumped.

He swung down through space. He had a confused impression of flashing rocks and snow, then he was almost on top of Wendy. His arms closed around her. Like a giant pendulum they swung upward and through space.

Then the thing happened that Carey had dreaded. The aged rope sawed against the boulder—broke. All support fell away from them, and he felt himself dropping, dropping . . . the girl a dead weight in his arms, wind whistling in his ears like hell's own furies.

WITH the crash all breath left his body. He seemed to be sinking into the bowels of the earth. His eyes opened blearedly. The girl's body lay half across his own. The merciful truth broke over him. They had fallen in a snowbank. And as he lay there, warming with the unspeakable relief of it, Wendy stirred and rolled from him.

He sat there, wiping snow away. The girl's eyes opened in terror. It came to Carey that she had had no warning—even now scarcely understood all that had happened. Then her head turned, and she saw him. What she did was wholly instinctive. She crawled toward him crying and settled in his arms. He comforted her.

As his head cleared, the true wonder of everything dawned. They had escaped Olaf Anton. She would have her mine. At the thought, he rose shakily. There was plenty yet to do.

With his help, she got tremblingly to her feet. Understanding was growing. She clung to him, and Carey found himself talking as he might have done to a child.

"It's all right now," he said. "We're finished with him. We'll get back now. We've got to file that claim—and find Champ."

All the way along the slope, she held onto him. They would have to make a long circuit to get back to the cavern. And as they floundered through dip and draw, Carey was thinking. She had her mine, but that let him out. He knew that never, unless he could bring to her more than he had to offer now, would he ask her to marry him. There was no way out of that.

She was looking at him. "Are you glad—about the mine?"

"You bet," he said. "I'm glad for you," and smiled.

They had almost reached the slope's end for the upward climb, when both halted. Preoccupation had prevented their realization of what was happening above them. Now the air had become thunderous, rumbling. They gazed upward and awe settled over them.

High on the peaks booming reports sounded. And it came to Carey that it was Olaf Anton's shots that had done this—hastened the landslide. While they looked, spellbound, the break-up came. Through the lofty passes darted giant white fingers. Stone and boulders were bounding down through gully and couloir. Under their feet the earth began to tremble. The avalanche was on its way. But they were safe here.

Carey felt her hand clutch his arm. Her lips parted as if to scream, but no sound came. Yet he understood. His eyes also had seen that nightmarish spectacle off to their right.

Four men were racing across the side of the mountain. They had just emerged from a canyon, and even at that distance Casey recognized them. It was Anton and the three Aleuts. They were running like startled animals flushed from cover.

And as they fled, the avalanche swept down upon them. The air was filled with explosion upon explosion. Boulders bounded down the mountainside, leaped into mid-air—broken into showers of rock and shale. It was as if the entire skyline had given way. A gigantic mass of snow and ice and stone was sliding down the mountain with the speed of an express train.

It was like some awesome Biblical judgment. Horror gripped the watching man and girl. Neither stirred nor seemed to breathe or was able to withdraw sight. Caught in the terror of that cataclysmic spectacle, they stood rigid.

The doomed men had scattered, fleeing like panic-stricken penguins. Alone, Olaf Anton halted. He knew that it was the end. It must have driven him to insane fury, the hopelessness of his fate. He stood stockstill. And the two watchers gaped with wonder at what he now did.

For Olaf Anton stood there, shaking clenched fists at the mountain. This was the mountain that he had enslaved to his bidding that had made him the greatest man in Alaska, filling his pockets with wealth and making him Alaska's king.

But Mad Mountain at last had turned on its master.

Carey had a split-second glimpse of that dreadful tableau—then the curtain fell.

It was a white, icy curtain that cascaded down upon the man who defied it, sweeping over him, filling the air with thunder and flying ice, licking into pass and gully, turning the whole world into a cataclysmic winter inferno . . . and then finally moving past, leaving only the dreadful field of trembling ice.

WHEN Wendy raised her head from his shoulder, Carey took a deep breath. In the face of that fury of nature, he was left with a puny, helpless feeling. Even his words sounded trivial.

"We've got to hurry now," he said. "We have to get on."

The way became incredibly difficult. It was some time before Carey realized it because his thoughts were on the cavern and finding Champ. They must reach it, mark the location and get back to town for the filing of the claim. They need never fear Anton again—but that claim must be filed at once. It was when the girl stumbled that a queer, unnerving thought began to stir Carey.

He took her arm. They were finding the going worse all the time, boulders and ice blocking the way. He roused at the sound of her voice. It was confused.

"We're lost. We're going the wrong way."

He shook his head. He knew that they were not lost. Taking his bearings from the town, clearly visible, he could mark the route to the cavern unmistakably.

It was some time later that she halted. She panted for breath. Her eyes were troubled as they turned toward him.

"Shouldn't we be there pretty soon?"

Carey tried to reply, but the words wouldn't come. A thought was gradually filling his mind, chilling him to the bone. They started on again, but had only gone a few yards, when again Wendy halted. She stood there, turning her head in all directions, studying the mountainside. Slowly, the blood receded from her face.

Her voice was no more than a whisper. "It's gone," she was saying. "The cavern isn't there. It's been wiped out. The avalanche buried it."

For a long time they stood in the stinging cold, neither speaking. Then she turned toward him, and took his arm. She looked up at him.

"One day it will pass," she said softly. "I've read about them in books. Thousands of years from now, it will pass." She looked at him, her eyes shining. "We'll wait for it to pass—together. Tom, I think you hated my having a mine, anyhow."

Around a snowdrift came Loony, and when he saw them he halted and stared. In that moment, with the realization that they had just seen a fortune wiped out, Carey had a weird impulse to laugh. For Loony still carried his sack full of tincans.

He approached them slowly, like a frightened animal. And suddenly Carey realized that a change had come over the hermit's bearing. His face was composed, sorrowful, the eyes not mad but shocked and still. It came to Carey that Loony had witnessed the avalanche, and that it had done something to him. That perhaps even sanity now stirred in that foolish brain.

"You remember us, Loony," Carey said kindly. "This is Hank Barr's daughter."

He saw the man's tremble. A look of unspeakable anguish filled Loony's face. One mud-smeared hand went out gropingly. And like a child he repeated Carey's words, "Hank . . . Barr's . . . daughter."

He took a few steps toward the girl. To Carey's surprise she did not flinch but regarded him with pitying eyes. Then suddenly the sourdough stopped. A shaking hand went into his ragged mackinaw, drew out a square of cardboard. Amazed, Carey saw it was a soiled, torn photograph. Loony was extending it tremblingly to the girl.

"Here's Hank Barr's daughter," he said faltering. "His daughter . . . and his wife."

Wendy stood as if hypnotized. Her hand took the photograph slowly, automatically. For a minute her eyes rested on it. At the next words, she straightened.

"And I am Hank Barr."

For a full minute the girl stared wide-eyed into the countenance, soiled, bewhiskered—neglect making it scarcely a human face. Then Carey heard her little cry and she sprang forward, taking the old man in her arms.

IX

IT was hours before they reached town and Mrs. Riley's boarding-house. Then Driscoll had to be seen and quieted, and it was a long time before they had had supper and heard Hank Barr's story.

Barr had been badly injured in the landslide, he told them, and taken to Olaf Anton's to die. It was then that he managed to write his family that Anton had the map of the mine. But a day later, instead of getting worse, he began to recover. And with recovery, he realized that Olaf Anton planned to kill him.

He had escaped from Anton's lodge and stolen into the mountains. His one thought was to avoid Anton and save the mine for his wife and daughter. His first night in the mountains, he almost died in a snowstorm. The resultant sickness and exposure must have shaken his mind. His recollections from then on were only confused—of living like an animal in the mountain, eating whatever he found.

In time, he had been seen by someone on the mountain, one of Anton's men. But the man did not recognize him. It was then that some kind of cunning must have come into Hank Barr's mind. He began to come to the town for refuse, garbage. Then he would return to dig in his mine.

Finally, he forgot even why he was there or what he had been . . . motivated solely, like a human mole, by the desire to dig and hide. Until the avalanche had shocked him fully awake—like a roused sleeper.

Carey saw the tears in Wendy's eyes. And when she showed him the photograph she carried, he could understand why no one had recognized Hank Barr, the derelict. The man in her picture was capable looking, the features and reliance much like her own.

Carey smiled when he saw the burlap sack that Hank Barr still had at his side.

Barr saw his smile, and tapped the sack. "Nuggets," he said.

Carey stared. Worry had again clouded the girl's eyes. Was Hank Barr still . . .

Composedly, the old man opened the sack, flung out a number of tincans. He called them over.

"Look in there *now*," he said proudly.

One glance told Carey that Hank Barr was not mad—but the owner of several hundred sizable nuggets.

"Now we won't miss that lost mine so much," Wendy's father said.

When they had gotten him to bed, they still sat there. She squeezed his hand, smiling impudently at him.

"This is different, isn't it?" she said. "It's all right to marry me now, Tom. *I'm* not rich. It's my father. You can't blame me if I have a rich father. That could happen to any girl."

He said thoughtfully, "I was thinking of what Lieutenant McDowell said. He said while Anton lived I was licked. Well, Anton's dead now. It'll change a lot of things. It'll make life worth living again for the poor devils in this town. And maybe I'll get my job back. I can go on paying for my farm. You ought to see those cabbages."

He scowled, "That is unless I get arrested by that constable again."

Wendy smiled. "I ought to be able to handle a local constable. Don't forget I have a government badge."

Both turned at a curious sound at the door. With a glance at the girl, Carey rose. He flung the door open. But he was mistaken. It was not the constable who stood there.

Into the room limped Champ. The lead dog's fur was bloodied, torn. One ear hung in shreds. But Carey's heart bounded with pride when he saw the dog's muzzle. It was matted with white bloodied fur.

"I'll get water and wash him," Wendy said.

Carey stood there, the dog's muzzle in his arms. He didn't say it aloud, because it would have sounded foolish. But Tom Carey thought it. Champ was just like his boss. He had a mean streak in him. He took plenty of licking but luck was with him. Somehow he always managed to hang on till the end.

TIMBER TRAP

By A. de HERRIES SMITH

Fire-bugs prowled the dusty timber of Wolf Tooth Reserve, and Ranger Bob Hanson was helpless to fight them; for the flames would start miles away—and his pony lay dead at his feet.

THE *chuk-chuk-chuk* of unshod hoofs drumming on sun-baked ground and a carefree voice shouting a song suddenly fractured the spruce woods' silent majesty.

A moment later, two riders and a white-covered pack horse jogged into view. Followed by a hovering cloud of flies they trotted over the red rocks of the ridge crest. They dropped down a trail through the willow bushes and came to the point where the forest merged with the shining waters of Mamasis Lake.

With moccasined heels Bob Hanson edged his pony over to a giant spruce and pulled out a glazed calico notice from a satchel tied to his saddle horn. Leaning out, the forest ranger tacked the sign on the tree with soft taps from the butt of his Colt. This done he slumped back and grinned at the Indian who rode with him.

Kayak rolled his slant eyes at the notice shining whitely against the spruce's dark bark. The native could not read, but he well knew what the sign said. It was a plainly printed warning to all men, white or red, to light no fires in the Wolf Tooth forest reserve.

Hanson shoved the Colt back into its holster, restrapped his satchel, and felt in his pockets for cigaret makings. Then suddenly he remembered the dry condition of the woodland and his fingers dropped the tobacco sack. He'd wait for that smoke until he was clear of the trees. With a cluck to the pony the ranger gathered the reins, only to let them fall again as he became rigid in the saddle, nostrils wrinkled.

With a sudden motion Hanson jerked the cayuse's head up and swung the pony to the east. There a thin column of wood smoke filtered up thinly through the branching arms of the spruce forest!

"Holy Christopher! A camp fire, Kayak." Hanson breathed deeply, still hardly able to credit his senses. "Here we've just finished a three weeks' ride, plastering notices at every portage and trail, and we come back home to find some careless fools actually lighting fires right next to the cabin. Jeerusalem!"

The Indian made a clucking noise in his throat, but said nothing, his impassive gaze still on the ranger. What would the white man do? Up here in the North the title of "Smiler" had been given to Hanson by reason of his easy-going amiability, but now the ranger was tight-lipped and icy-eyed.

A grunt from the horse answered the Indian's query, and before he had time to swing his own pony about the ranger was galloping down the trail, head bent low to avoid the swishing willow bushes.

HANSON'S mount pounded down the little pack pad, clattered over the beach stones, and then swinging about, trotted through a narrow neck of timber lying close to the lake. So he came to a small flat, hemmed in by the dark green forest on three sides and by the mirrowed lake on the fourth.

The ranger's cabin was in clear view, where it sat on a high knoll. Below it two men squatted at a camp fire, built against the bole of one of the spruce trees. They had apparently finished their evening meal, as now the fire was covered with moss and grass thus making a smoke smudge to ward off the mosquitoes' attacks.

"Moe Sturt and that 'breed Laronde!" Hanson muttered to himself as his heels drummed on the pony's ribs and he rode directly toward the campers.

The ranger's face went white under its tan with passion. Sturt of all men, to pull a thing like this! Why, he was head timber cruiser for the Carcajou Lumber Company, and if anyone knew

Three times Sturt brought the heavy skillet down on Hanson's head—and the ranger collapsed on the dying fire.

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the danger of setting out camp fires now, he should.

The thudding hoofs brought the two at the fire to their feet. They stood there in the smoke's shelter as Hanson rode up and slid off the sweating pony.

"What's the idea of this?" the youngster asked, waving one brown hand to the fire, throwing the question directly at Sturt and ignoring the half-breed.

"Idea of what?" the timber cruiser queried; voice thin and sharp. The man took a step forward, looking down at Hanson's tensed face. He was all of two hundred pounds of bone and trail-hardened muscles—a big man, well formed, who though over forty looked considerably less by reason of a clean life spent in the open.

The timber cruiser was dressed in much the same garb as the ranger: khaki shirt, canvas trousers and the inevitable moccasins. Like Hanson he was clean-shaven and close-cropped. The main difference between the two lay in their eyes and mouths; Sturt's eyes were close-set and piercing, his mouth a narrow slit that could be cruel.

"Don't pull that innocent stuff, Sturt," the ranger advised the lumberman, his tone frosty. "You know darned well that the woods are as dry as tinder; one little blaze and the whole hundred square miles would go, if a wind sprung up. You're a timberman and you know that. What's more you savvy that it's against the reserve regulations to set out fires of any kind, especially smack-up against the bottom of a spruce! I've just put up about two hundred notices all over the place. You couldn't help but see them. This is a showdown, Sturt; you're going to pack and move off the reserve right away."

Sturt shrugged his great shoulders and a faint smile hovered at the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. Plainly the gesture read: "Try and make me!"

The sound of trotting hoofs came from behind, then low greetings in Cree between the Indian and the half-breed. Hanson half turned, then gulped. He was staring at four ragged white corners on the spruce stem opposite. Then his eyes dropped from where the notice had been wrenched away, and sought the fire. A slow red replaced the white on the ranger's face.

The fire warning had been used to light Sturt's fire! Hanson saw one little half-burned fragment of the oiled calico lying close to the fire, on top of which the timber cruiser's billy-can simmered.

A SPLIT SECOND later the evening air was filled with hissing and a cloud of steam, when the ranger's moccasin shot out and overturned the billy-can's water onto the fire.

"Here, what the—?"

Sturt's query was fractured by Hanson's hand reaching for his shoulder, as the youngster whirled about. The larger man was no coward and furthermore he was well satisfied that things had reached a climax. But a moment later his complacency was shattered when Hanson sent in two withering jabs to his face.

The timber cruiser's tanned features were wolfish as he swung back and a knotted fist, mounted on a heavily-muscled arm, shot out at the ranger's head. But Hanson wasn't there!

Down in the settlements, where the loggers gathered to celebrate noisily after the logs were in the booms, Sturt was well known for his fighting prowess. Likewise he was tabulated as a "dirty scrapper" and the little ranger had no intention of allowing him to come to close quarters.

Hanson darted backward across the hissing fire, then returned like a whip lash. He planted another stinging blow on the lobe of Sturt's right ear, and was out from under his arms before the big man had half turned.

The ranger was dimly aware of the red smears on the cruiser's face above eyes that held murder now. He sensed the position of the Indian and the half-breed from the shuffling moccasins; was half conscious of the three horses now nosing about for pea-vine. Hanson gathered himself again and leaped forward.

In that moment the half-breed lunged through the air. Two yellow hands fastened about Hanson's ankles, and the white man and the brown went down together with a crash.

Even as he hit the ground, the ranger rolled over and sent the 'breed's head sideways with a short-arm jab, but be-

fore he could regain control of his muscles and leap to his feet Sturt was on top of him.

Back and forth across the still hissing fire the two men rolled, battering savagely, bumping against the tree stems, but Sturt had timed the attack to a nicety. He had landed with his knees on the ground on either side of the ranger and even the wicked blows raining up into his face could not hinder his purpose.

With strained faces and gasped breathing the two men squirmed this way and that, Sturt's eyes always fixed on the frying pan lying close to the fire. Another roll, a quick lurch, and it was in his hands.

Hanson caught a fleeting glance of something black between him and the sun. An alert brain warned him—but too late!

THREE times the heavy pan came down on the ranger's skull with vicious thuds. Hanson's fists suddenly relaxed, a low groan came to his lips. He lay limply on the hard ground.

"That'll . . . hold . . . him!" Sturt grunted as he got to his feet, lungs wheezing, and tucked his khaki shirt down into his pants. He kicked the unconscious man with a contemptuous moccasin.

"Sacre! He no dead, eh?" Laronde whined, staring over at his master out of a high-cheeked, yellow face. "Me, I do not care so much to be hunged. By gar, the Mounted Police—"

"Dry up!" Sturt ordered curtly. "No police this side of the Wapiti river. He's knocked out for a couple of days an' that's all the time I wants. That blasted Indian beat it with the horses, eh? Well, never mind going after him; he's half way to hell an' gone by now. You done all right anyhow. Load the canoe an' we'll mosey."

The half-breed rolled his eyes at the unconscious man again, then dutifully gathered the camp gear together and padded off down to the lake.

Sturt ran a thick hand down the ranger's shirt, until it rested over his heart. Then the big man came to his feet again, gave the almost motionless body another kick, and turned to stride down to his canoe.

Bob Hanson opened his eyes hours later to find himself stretched on his bunk in the cabin, with a mound of wet blanket on his head, and the bedding saturated. Kayak heaved another bucket of water over the ranger for good measure, then sat down on his own bunk across the cabin and silently awaited developments.

"Oh, my God!" the ranger groaned, as his mind commenced to function again. "What a wallop! There's a million bees buzzing around in my head. Gone, eh?"

"Huh-huh," Kayak emitted his customary grunt and again relapsed into silence.

"Know what?" Hanson asked his mute companion, after he had washed his aching head and tied it up in a rough bandage. "No, of course, you don't. Well it's this way, Noisy. Joe Dixon told me that Sturt's company was after the timber on the reserve, but, of course, they can't get it. Not green timber anyhow. But listen, Kayak. Burnt timber makes good lumber if it's sawed not more than a year after the fire goes through it! Get that?"

Kayak grunted once more. He was making whittlings to light the fire and appeared to be only half alive. Hanson put another wet rag on his head, snorted his disgust at the Indian's lack of comprehension, and went on again:

"Another thing is that the Carcajou outfit can buy the burnt timber off the government for anything they like to offer, seeing that they have the only mill near the reserve. Once the spruce has been scorched it must be got rid of right away. See the point? I thought Joe was full of hop, but I know now that he was right. Sturt is going to burn off the reserve and then the timber practically belongs to his company. Don't say "huh-huh" again or I'll throw something at you!"

Hanson edged himself back on the bunk again and listened to the Indian shuffling about with the cooking utensils.

"Hustle it!" the ranger ordered curtly. "We're going after Sturt. I can watch that coffee from here. You go down and load the canoe. For Pete's sake, don't look at me with that blank gaze! I'll be all right in half an hour! Get out! Get out!"

When the Indian padded out the ranger

forced himself to rise and attend to the cooking. He well knew that he could not afford to give way; he'd have to crowd that aching head out of his thoughts. Sturt must be caught before he reached the big river, otherwise—

Shuffling moccasins cut off Hanson's train of thought. Kayak was standing in the low doorway, fringed deerskins outlined against the clear sky behind. The Indian waved his hands and muttered, *"Namoya! Namoya!"*

Hanson dropped the pan on the cookstove with a clang, blurting out, *Namoya* what? What's wrong?"

"Osi! The canoe," Kayak returned, bronzed mask still emotionless. "Cut with knife. No can go!"

The ranger thrust the man aside, and forgetful of his hurts, ran down to the beach below the trees. There he saw that the birchbark had been thoroughly slashed with a sharp knife. The delicate skin was cut in a dozen different places. It would take a full day or more to render the little vessel seaworthy again.

Without a word the ranger turned away for the log barn under the poplars, waving an imperative hand to the watching Indian. No words passed as the ponies were saddled and led out of the stable. The pack horse was lightly loaded and half an hour later the three animals were being forced along a zig-zagging path through the forest.

Chicadees chirped in the branches overhead, squirrels scolded the trespassers of their woodland domain, and snowshoe rabbits blundered out of the way as the ponies trotted forward.

Hanson was busy with his thoughts and heedless of these things. Although the pack trail ran along the river he well knew that his chance of overtaking Sturt was a slim one. A canoe could travel twice as fast as a horse, with the current under it, and in any case the trail took wide bends that almost doubled the distance.

THE ranger usually whistled and sang when he was deep in the woods he loved, but now he was as silent as the Indian. Hanson well understood what Sturt's intentions were. The man was traveling westward toward the mountains. Arrived at the edge of the timber he would start a fire with one of the prevailing westerly winds behind it and that would be the end of the Wolf Tooth reserve; the end as well of his job and his ambition to become a forest supervisor.

Time and again the trail swung down to the river's edge, when the riders could glimpse the swirling waters beyond. Then the pad would lead inland to circle some slough or muskeg, and with each detour oaths came to Hanson's lips. The ponies were native-bred animals, sure-footed but slow, and the ranger sensed there was little use endeavoring to crowd them.

So they jogged on in a silence unbroken but for the horses' soft footfalls on the moss and the faint bird voices in the sweeping branches overhead.

All at once a guttural exclamation came from the Indian behind. He broke off a fragment of dry branch from a willow bush, and using the sharp end as a spur, drove his pony about the pack horse and level with Hanson's mount. A jerk on the ranger's reins brought his pony to a sudden halt.

"What the hell's the matter with you; gone crazy?" Hanson threw out acidly. "We'll have breakfast when it gets dark, if that's—"

Kayak grunted, slid from his horse, and ran forward a few paces. The Indian jerked out his long-bladed hunting knife, standing poised for a long moment. Then his arm shot out. There was a glint as the knife left his hand, and a split second later a rumbling thunder shook the woods.

A heavy log crashed down across the trail, sending up clouds of dry moss, sticks and leaves!

"Great Jupiter. A deadfall!" the ranger said to himself as he slid off the pony and walked forward to where Kayak was bent down, examining the rawhide cord that had been cut by his knife.

"Huh. Bad," the Indian mumbled, pointing to where the rawhide had stretched across the trail, just high enough above the ground to catch a horse's fetlock, and thus pull away the log's support and bring the deadfall crashing down.

"I take it all back," Hanson chuckled, patting the native's deerskin-clad back. "You may be a graven image, but you've

sure got eyes. Thanks for my life, Kayak; I won't forget it."

But the jocularity went from the ranger's tones when his woodland-trained eyes followed a faint pad through the moss, leading down to the shining river, just visible through a matter tangle of alder bushes.

"Sturt is a bad man, and from this he'll stop at nothing," the youngster told himself. "Some friend of his on the hills behind the cabin must have sent him a smoke signal saying we were leaving. If the log had knocked me out, the fire would have wiped out all signs of the killing, too. Well planned, I'll say that. All right, Kayak, we'll hike," he called to the Indian as he caught his cayuse and swung up in the saddle.

The sun was dropping when finally the two riders left the woods' shelter and rode out into open country rock-studded and fractured by bare granite rolls.

Hanson used the quirt on his tired pony, and leaving the Indian to bring the packhorse, loped along the ridges to where he knew he could obtain a view down the long lake that lay immediately beyond.

"Good enough," the ranger said grimly to himself, when he topped the watershed and stood silhouetted against the clear sky line. Away to the west, perhaps three miles distant, smoke was mounting up column-like into the thin air.

"Sturt was too damned smart," Hanson said to the Indian when Kayak rode up, his quirt thugging on the pack-pony's cover. "Made sure that deadfall would get me, so he's taking it easy. Pretty lucky, Kayak! We have open country from here on, and with any kind of a show at all we can cut across the neck, and be on the big river before him."

The Indian nodded his shock head, slipped off his pony, and commenced slackening the cinches.

"No, not here," the ranger checked him. "We'll camp back in the timber, where our fire won't be seen. There's a nice little slough over there by those poplars; plenty of grass for the ponies." He clucked to the tired cayuse and headed back for the trees.

With the deftness of the northlander, he had a fire going in short order, and while the Indian rubbed the ponies down with wisps of dry grass and hobbled them, Hanson sliced bacon into the pan and set the coffee pot to boil. Five minutes later the evening air was laden with the aromatic scents of bacon and coffee, drowning the pungent odor of the resinous jackpine branches in the fire.

Both men ate heartily, and when the night fell, wrapped themselves in the blankets and found soft places in the moss for their hips. They were asleep almost immediately.

SUDDENLY four rifle shots, coming almost together, shattered the night's silence and brought the two guardians of the timber rolling out of their blankets.

Then came another single shot and a horse's scream. Almost instinctively Hanson's feet felt for his moccasins, while he wrenched the Colt out of its holster. A moment later he was running across the slough, clad only in his underclothes.

The night was dark, and but faintly illuminated by the stars. As he ran the ranger could see three bulky shapes stretched on the ground and understood that now he was without horses.

But Hanson's brain could hold no coherent train of thought. Something moved there beyond the spruce trees and now nothing mattered but to reach the horse killers and settle this thing once and for all.

"Ah!" The exclamation was almost a grunt, when the ranger threw himself flat on the springy turf. A revolver bullet whistled through the air where his body had been a moment ago. Then came the swishing of willow bushes and a faint laugh.

"You swine, I'll get you yet!" Hanson gritted as he came to his feet again. Now caution had gone from him. Hot young blood boiled through his veins, and he boldly ran through the screen of willow bushes, head bent to avoid the stinging withes.

It was pitch black in the bush, and in a few minutes Hanson slowed his wild rush to a walk, well knowing that the other men would be forced to do likewise. He went forward, feeling before him with his left hand, the other holding the revolver at the ready.

Half a dozen yards and all at once his groping hand touched some foreign substance. It was not a tree's stem, the ranger knew, and sudden hope bubbled up in him as he reached out and sank his fingers into a deerskin coat!

A great circle of orange and scarlet light burst in the ranger's eyes; his ears drummed with the sudden volume of sound when a revolver was fired pointblank into his face. Hanson felt the wind of the bullet's passage as he staggered back, half blinded by that sudden glare.

A second later he gathered himself and groped forward again, but the coat was gone.

"Get him?" a deep voice queried above the swishing of the willow stems. It was Moe Sturt's tones.

"*Sacre,* yes!" Laronde replied, pantingly. "He hold my *capote* an' I fire. Easy, eh?" A laugh from the other man assured him that it was.

Hanson raised the revolver, following the direction of the voices, but lowered it as quickly.

"No, not now," he cautioned himself.

The ranger stood motionless in the dark, listening to the voices growing fainter. Then with a grimace of chagrin he turned about and made a slow backward passage to the open country.

Kayak was sitting on the dead pack pony, waiting for him, when Hanson left the shelter of the bush and stepped out into the stars' half light.

"We're in a sweet fix now," he told the staring Indian. "No canoe and no horses. Lord, I wish you'd swear or say something. Can't make a raft and follow them; too slow. No chance of catching them on foot either. . . . Blazes! What's the use of talking to you, anyhow?"

SWIFT waters had carried Moe Sturt's canoe rapidly north. Now he was within a day's paddling of the big river and when that was reached he would turn west, and track the canoe up against stream until he reached the particular spot he had in mind—a narrow funnel-shaped valley down which the winds volleyed from the Rockies. He knew of no better place in which to commence the fires that would turn the green forests into black sticks.

It would be easy logging, too, when the spruce was fire-killed; no underbrush, and the government would have to give his company a low stumpage rate or see the Wolf Tooth timber all wasted. He'd be made superintendent for this job. No danger either. The fires would cover up all traces of the killings.

Sturt commenced a tuneless whistling as the canoe rode along on the swiftly sliding current. Up in the bow the half-breed was only making a pretense of dipping his blade. The timber cruiser took no notice of Laronde's inherited laziness. There was a time coming when Emil would have to track the canoe up against the Athabasca's current, and that would be work enough.

The big man's eyes were ranging the banks looking for a suitable camping place. It was still daylight, but there was no need to hurry and he had made up his mind to shoot a couple of spruce hens and have fried chicken for supper instead of the customary bacon and beans—a triumphant banquet, in a way.

"All right, Emil; paddle over to that long point there."

Sturt's words brought the half-breed upright with a start, but the big man only laughed at the sleep-dazed eyes turned to him. Then Larronde laughed, too.

They made a comfortable camp under a wide-branched spruce. Sturt brought down a couple of spruce hens with a well aimed club and they made a satisfactory meal. Pipes filled with the raw "tabac Canadien," they lay stretched on the moss, listening to the night noises.

From somewhere back on the ridges a lone coyote saluted the thin half-circle of moon, the animal's voice ringing out over the sleeping valley. A black bear splashed softly along the river's backwaters hunting for fish, and once a moose threshed through the alder bushes close beside them.

In his mind's eye Sturt could see all these animals fleeing wildly before the fires in a few short days from now. But the thought failed to move him. He was going to get rich, and in a hurry; that idea filled his mind to the exclusion of everything else.

"Well, Emil, guess we might as well turn in," the big man said at length.

"You'll be busy tomorrow, trackin' up against the Athabasca. Better get a good night's sleep."

The half-breed grinned thinly. He disliked work exceedingly, but tomorrow was a long way off yet. He rummaged about for his blankets in the dark, humming to himself as he found a hole for his hips.

The fire flickered out and presently was nothing more than a red smudge. Sturt watched it for a time, but like others who spend a life in the open, he slept easily and well. He lost consciousness with the river's drone ringing pleasantly through his mind.

Piping bird voice saluted the dawn as gray fingers of light commenced to touch the hill crests, bringing the spruce trees' foliage into lacy tracery against the sky.

Sturt awoke with the birds, yawned, stretched himself, and throwing the warm blankets aside, sat upright. There he froze!

TWO men were squatted with hands outstretched above the fire's coals, staring over at him. Bob Hanson got to his feet and nodded cheerfuly.

"Gawd!" A single gasped word from the timber cruiser. But his brain was even quicker than his tongue. One hand darted under the folded mackinaw coat that had served for a pillow; flashed into view again, tipped with dull light.

Two guns roared. The ranger's Colt spat a yellow beam just a fraction of a second before Sturt's. Hanson was wide awake and had been waiting. Now Sturt was rolling about on the ground, one hand clasped about his shattered wrist; roaring curses and useless threats.

Hanson dropped his gun. A glance over his shoulder showed him that Kayak had not forgotten his instructions and was picking the weapon up.

Laronde was half way to his feet, tugging at his knife sheath when Hanson sent him backward with a vicious blow. The 'breed gave up searching for his weapon, wound his arms about the ranger's legs and brought him to earth with a crash.

A fleeting vision came to Emil Laronde. Once before he had known the exercise quadrangle of the Prince Albert penitentiary, and it filled his brain with dismay. He tore wildly at Hanson's shoulders striving to pull the ranger's face down within reach of his yellow teeth.

Panting breaths, the sound of nails tearing tough clothing, and Laronde's yelps for assistance filled the crisp morning air. There was no reply from the two at the fire and the ranger understood that Kayak's attitude had convinced Sturt that to move meant death.

Again and again Hanson's hard fist crashed down into the half-breed's face. Then all at once to the white man's vague surprise Laronde's clawing ceased and he lay motionless.

The ranger got up slowly, settled his torn shirt, and waited for a full minute before he stepped across to the camp fire. Sturt was still nursing his wrist; Kayak was calmly chewing a bit of willow bark.

"This is your finish," Hanson wheezed at the other man. "I'm going to get you all the law allows."

Sturt's face was wrinkled with pain. He managed a laugh, however, as he pointed down to the beach. There a strange and clumsy craft was pulled up on the stones.

"Yes, that's how we came down," the ranger admitted. "I'd never shoot a horse, even to catch a swine like you, but you drew the wrong card out of the deck when you killed those three ponies."

Sturt shrugged the accusation aside. His curiosity overcame him and he asked curtly, "Where did you get the canoe, anyhow?"

"Made it," Hanson informed him, a shade of triumph in his tones. "Skinned one of the ponies, and stretched the hide on a frame of bent willow sticks. Tough thing to paddle, but good enough to catch you."

"Huh-huh," Sturt said disdainfully. "Nothin' new in that. Old Indian trick. Oh well; got any chewin'?"

"Plenty in the settlement," Hanson returned curtly, stung by the man's indifference. "Perhaps Sergeant McAllister will let you buy some. Shove out that wrist and I'll try to fix it up."

Kayak's eyes roved from one white-man to the other. He grunted his satisfaction and squatted down before the fire.

LOGGER LAW

By EVAN SLYTER

Orville was up again, dazed. Curran bored in with both fists.

The Kid wouldn't fight, in the timberland camp—where a man had to prove his worth by the weight of his fists.

ANANIAS JONES, woods boss of Pine Camp, paused half-way between his office and that of the camp manager. From the bunk-house came the sounds of voices raised in anger.

The commotion was out of tune with the quiet, early June evening. It rasped harshly on the nerves of a woods boss who was on his way to visit the girl whom he expected to marry within a month. With such raucous sounds singing in his ears, what lover could be properly worshipful?

Jones turned his steps toward the bunk-house and stopped beneath the screened window.

"That's what I said, mama's boy! Just step outside with me and I'll teach you some manners!"

An old and familiar sound that. Jones had heard it many times during his many years in the woods. And often he had accepted such an invitation, to the discomfiture of the other fellow usually. Just now it was Mutt Curran, a lean, dark-browed teamster, who was speaking. That harsh voice was becoming a nuisance around camp.

"I'm no mama's boy, but I don't fight. I have no quarrel with you." That voice was pleasant and youthful.

Jones saw the image of Orville Stone, a youngster who had come to camp just a few days before, from high school. Orville's father was a friend of Broadhurst, the camp manager and father of Blanche, the girl Jones intended to marry. Orville had been sent to stay until college opened in the fall. He was eighteen, good-looking, and athletic. He had become an immediate favorite with the crew, excepting, it seemed, Mutt Curran.

"Don't have no quarrel with me, hey? Who was just tryin' to tell me how to

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handle my team? Who was just buttin' into my business!"

"All I said was that I thought a man could get more work out of a team by treating it well than by kicking it around all the time."

"Yeah! Ain't that buttin' into my business! My team, ain't it? I've been handlin' hosses for ten years and I ain't takin' no advice from nobody! Now, if you think you're such a man, just come outside! I'll show you how to butt in!"

Jones held his breath. In the code of the lumberjack there is only one answer to such a challenge.

"I don't fight, I tell you. That won't settle anything. I didn't think you'd get sore just about a suggestion."

"You dirty, yellow-livered pup! Scared to come out and get your nice little map all mussed up, eh?"

"Go ahead," said Stone's voice mildly. "Call me names if that'll help you any. But I don't fight. I'm no bum."

"Bum! Bum!" Mutt's voice shrilled into nothing from sheer indignation. Before he could get his breath, Johnson's booming voice broke in.

"Now, shut up, Curran!" ordered the scaler of the camp gruffly. "The kid won't fight and that's all there is to that. If you don't want a quarrel on your hands, Stone, you'd better keep your nose out of other people's business."

"I won't shut up!" shouted Curran. "No damn. . . ."

"Shut up!"

This time the bald-headed scaler's voice carried something besides an order. Mutt mumbled, but not loud enough for Jones to hear. The ordinary hum of evening conversation commenced. Jones proceeded to the building occupied by the Broadhursts.

BLANCHE welcomed him with a kiss. Broadhurst clasped his hand warmly.

"Just in time, Elmer," said the manager. "There's a fine quartet on the air tonight. But I believe I could do better than that bass at that. How's everything been today?"

As woods boss, it was Jones who kept in continuous contact with the men. Broadhurst's work consisted largely of sales-correspondence, estimating, bidding in on contract work, and handling the books. Both men were kept busy. It was their habit to compare notes in the evening.

Ananias seated himself beside Blanche and told the only occurrence of interest, Orville's refusal to fight.

"Good for him," said Blanche. "It takes courage to refuse to fight. I detest that Curran."

Ananias met Broadhurst's eyes and grimaced.

"Yeh—I mean yes, that's the woman's side of it. But you know, Blanche, that lumberjacks don't look at it that way. Orville's in for some hard knocks from now on."

"Well, he's trying to be civilized. He isn't an old roughneck."

"Like me," suggested Jones with a grin. "Listen, young woman, how'd you suppose I handled the deal that got me this job? With pink teas and nice words?"

Blanche reached up and gave his yellow mop a pull.

"Well, you're kind of a roughneck, Elmer, but you don't go around looking for fights."

"I don't! You pull my hair again and you're going to have a scrap on your hands! Nobody can get rough with me and get away with it!"

Blanche merely wrinkled her nose at him.

"Well, as long as Dad's here I won't start a fight, Mister Ananias. But I admire Orville just the same."

"A broad hint for me to leave," smiled Broadhurst. "But before I go I want you to know that I agree with Elmer, dear. Civilized or not, men who work with their hands have the code that says something about fighting with the hands.

"In business, we fight with money and business brains. Among brainy men the fight goes on in the field of brains. But it's fight, Blanche, in any field. That's life. Win or lose, one must fight. Orville has violated the code. He'll pay for it."

"Right," said Ananias. "And the worst of it is that I can't step in and help him out. I couldn't do it under any circumstances."

"We'll see about *that*," said Blanche impudently as her father left the room. That round ended in a clinch.

ORVILLE, it seemed, had no ideas about codes in a logging camp. The following evening John Johnson, the bald-headed scaler and Jones's pal, came to the woods boss with a large-sized frown on his full-moon features.

"Say," he demanded of Jones, "what's Broadhurst's idea of making this camp into a nursery!"

Jones looked up from his desk.

"Meaning?" he suggested.

"Young Orv Stone. Last night he wouldn't stand up and fight like a man and today he went and swiped somebody else's tools. His draw-shave got dull so he went and borrowed King's. King was mad enough to eat soap. The kid claimed he was just trying to save time."

Johnson mopped his brow near the back of his head.

"Last night my girl had a diamond ring;
Tonight no ring you see.
She hocked it at a three-ball shop,
My heart's gone bust, by gee!"

Ananias grinned as he recited the lines.

"You oughta read Longfellow, Johnny-haha. He soothes the nerves. That's from the poem called 'The Wreck of Hester's Cuss.' There's another stanza goes like this,

"She struck where my white and fleecy locks
Looked nice and soft and cool;
But her iron fist just numbed my brain
Like the kick of an angry mule."

Johnson placed his squat frame on a complaining chair and registered acute disgust.

"Cut it out now, Ananias! This is serious, I tell you. That danged kid is going to get himself into a real muss. No time for a love-sick fool to be reciting poetry from any feller, long or short."

"Thanks. Blanche wouldn't admit it was poetry. Said I ought to be ashamed of myself for making a mess out of serious ballads. Point is, Blanche tells me I gotta help this kid out of *his mess.*"

"Blanche this and Blanche that! Say, what do you gotta go and fall for a woman for? You never broke out with poetry before."

"Nope. But Blanche claims that poetry's the only thing that'll cure me of lying. Same's stuttering is cured by singing."

"I was talking about Orville."

"Be good, sweet maid," returned Jones. *"But if you can't be good, be comely."*

He ducked the scale-rule that Johnson threw at him.

"Anyway, that was wrong, Baldy," Jones continued. "You couldn't be comely. Point is, I don't know what to do for Orville. So don't get all het up about him."

"About him? It's me I'm worrying about. You can sit here on your pants and laugh while I get out and worry. What am I going to do about it?"

Jones became serious. "I don't know, Baldy. I'm sorry for the kid and that's all that's worrying you, too. If we butt in it won't help him any. Let's let nature take its course for a while. I'll catch hell from Blanche for that, but I can't see what else to do. I'll try to think of something. In the meantime, let Orville take his medicine. I don't think it'll kill him."

"But I like the kid, Ananias."

"Yeh, so do I. But you don't want to forget that kindness has ruined more lives than love or booze, and look what love has done to me."

Johnson's blue eyes gathered in a few of their accustomed twinkles.

"Yeh, petticoats are sure ruining you."

"Petticoats! Go on, get out of here, Methuselah. And don't trip on any hoop-skirts as you leave. Beat it, now. Remember, I'm your boss."

Johnson went, a puzzled expression on his face.

APPARENTLY Orville got plenty of medicine during the next week, for on Saturday evening he dropped into the office and asked Jones for his time. The youngster's face was pale. In his frank eyes there was a hurt look.

"Time?" asked Jones. "Trouble, Orv? Tired of camp life so soon?"

Orville swallowed hard. "Y-yessir. I don't like it."

Jones made out an order for a check to cover the hours the lad had worked. He stood up and took Stone by the arms.

"You're a good husky feller, Orv. Weight about a hundred and sixty-five, eh?"

"About that, Mr. Jones."

"Uh-huh. Ever play any football or rough games?"

Orville's face brightened.

"Sure. I was left half on the high school team for two years. I play any old game."

"Ever do any boxing?"

"Some. At the Y. M. down home."

"Always played by the rules, did you? I mean to say that you didn't try to sneak under 'em all the time."

"I always played clean."

"You took the rules of the game as you found 'em, eh? Never beefed and tried to make 'em your own way?"

"Why, of course not. A fellow can't do that."

"Wouldn't be much of a game if each feller made his own rules, would it?

"I 'member one time I tried to teach baseball to a bunch of Arabs that was camped about fifty miles northwest of Aden. You know where Aden is, don't you?"

Orville couldn't remember. Jones pointed to a large map of the world that he had recently purchased and hung on the wall of his office. He'd found it a great aid to his geography yarns.

"Well, sir, here's where it was. Them Arabs was all togged out like you see 'em in the movies. All of 'em were hard nuts.

"Arabs, you know, think it's fun to fight with knives and such stuff. And guns! Man, they just love to shoot holes in somebody. Not mean, y' understand; just playful. When you get to know 'em you love 'em, if you live long enough.

"Sit down, son, and I'll tell you about it."

Orville took a seat. Jones leaned against the desk, a reminiscent light in his honest brown eyes.

"Now it happened that some Englishmen from Aden had been teaching these fellers some other games like tennis, cricket and golf. Besides that, they knew about football, basketball and some other games they'd played for years.

"Well, sir, they was bound and determined that I should teach 'em the great American game. So I told 'em all I knew about it and started 'em out.

"Right off I run up against a snag. Every feller on each team had his own ideas about how to play and they was some mixed ideas, believe me. The first batter up was bound to use a tennis racket for a bat. The pitcher wouldn't use my baseball on account he liked the fancy colors on a croquet ball he'd swiped from a caravan.

"The catcher was using a net instead of a mitt. He had it slung on a hoop he'd got off a bug-catcher he'd held up the week before.

"First base was football goal posts made out of two spears with a snakeskin stretched between 'em. Second base was a basketball backboard with a bushel basket on it. Third base had a spear stuck in a hole with the number 3 on it.

"The umpire was using a golf-club and counting balls and strikes by the number of strokes it took him to knock a football into the third base hole. He had two strikes on the first man up before he'd got to the plate.

"That game ended with the first batter. He swung at a speedy croquet ball. It went through his racket, hit the net, bounced into the batter's dome and sent the batter staggering toward first. The first baseman tackled him so hard that they both bumped into the snakeskin, tore down the spears, and fell across the back of a camel what was sleeping close by.

"The camel got scared and hopped like mad for second. The second baseman looped a horseshoe and hit the camel in the head. He stumbled and the batter landed in the bushel basket just as the umpire sank his football on a short putt. The umpire yelled 'Safe!'

"In the meantime the croquet ball had bounced back and hit the catcher, which made him sore. He grabbed up a rifle, aimed at the right fielder and shot the third baseman in the ankle.

"The third baseman howled, 'Fore!' and hopped toward home plate, which was a big drum. He hit the drum with one swinging hand.

"It woke up the runner in the second basket. He hopped out, rounded third, tripped over the football and slid all the way home. The umpire yelled, 'Safe!' again and the score-keeper put down 40-love as the score on a two-basket hit.

"Then he got up, shot the runner dead, measured out a six-by-six-by-three grave, and then put behind his score that there was four cubic yards to go. About that

time I hopped a nice Arab horse and made a home run."

Jones sighed and shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"And there," he concluded mournfully, "is what happens when each feller makes his own rules of the game. Sounds crazy, don't it? But it's a fact. That's the way with them Arabs."

ORVILLE was laughing.

"It sounds crazy all right, Mr. Jones. But of course something like that would happen if each man made his own rules."

"You said it. Well, Orv, you just take that slip over to Blanche Broadhurst and she'll make out your check. When you pulling out?"

Orville's face fell. "Tonight. I can't stand it around here any longer."

"That's all right. I guess Mister Broadhurst will run you to the village in his car, seeing he's a friend of your Dad. Well, good-bye, son. If you decide you'd like to come back after a little vacation, just drop in again. But remember that little baseball game I told you about."

Orville nodded and left the office. A half hour later Jones heard the car pull out of the camp grounds. He went at once to Blanche. She opened the door for him with a reproachful glance.

"You let him go," she chided.

"Well, I couldn't very well tie him up, could I?"

"Please don't try to be funny. You could have done something."

"Now, Blanche. . . ."

"Don't speak to me. I'm angry. Orville didn't have a chance."

"Nope. Neither did Lincoln. Now, young woman, you quit sulking and write a letter for me. I'm here on business and your Dad said you were my stenographer when I needed one."

"And you told him another of those lies of yours, too."

"That wasn't a lie."

"Elmer, it was. Nobody could ever believe anything so ridiculous. I'm disappointed in you."

"Are you going to write that letter for me?"

Jones took Blanche by the arms and gazed at her sternly.

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"That wasn't any more a lie," he said, "than that poetry you've been cramming me with. That was what you called 'poetic truth' and it might do some good. This letter I want to write is to Orville's dad."

Blanche's blue, gold-flecked eyes met Jones's gaze briefly. Then she nodded and sat down before her typewriter.

A SOMEWHAT shame-faced young man presented himself to Jones a few days later. He held out a letter to the woods boss.

"Dad sent me back. Here's a note he told me to give you."

"Going to face the music, eh? All right. Take your same bunk. Are you an Arab?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, study the rules of a lumberjack's code as you see it and then do some thinking. Get out of here!"

Orville jumped, gave Ananias an astonished look, and went.

Jones opened the letter. He read:

My Dear Mr. Jones:

I received your note on the day after Orville's return. I agree with you. My son must learn to live in the world as it is and not as he thinks it is. He got too many silly ideas while in school. He thinks that he can high-hat the world and get away with it.

By all means, make him live up to the code of the men with whom he is working. Go the limit, but remember, please, that I'd like to have you understand a father's point of view. Orville thought that story about the Arabs was just in fun. I understand it perfectly.

Sincerely,
F. H. Stone.

Ananias nodded to himself and went out to make his rounds. When he reached the landing where cedar poles were being stripped of their bark he found Orville already on the job, working near Harvey King.

It was King's draw-shave that Stone had borrowed when his own became too dull to use. Harvey was still keeping that fact in mind, apparently, for Jones, who had approached unobserved, heard him say:

"So the mama's pest is back again, hey? Say, kid, did you learn how to sharpen your own tools yet?"

"I can't see why you fellows can't forget about a little thing like that, King. I just did it because I wanted to get out more work and you weren't using it anyway."

"Yeah. At so much a pole you wanted to save time. And dull up my tools to do it. Yeah!"

Jones moved on. He knew that Orville would get plenty of knocks out of his return.

Mutt Curran was cross-hauling at the loading jammer about a quarter of a mile up the track. Jones stopped beside the teamster.

"Learned to handle a team in the right way yet, Mutt?" He ran his hand over the flank of the nearest horse. "Seems to me you're not handling these horses just right to get the best out of 'em. They're getting out of condition. Guess young Stone was right about that. Well, he's back again. Maybe he'll give you some pointers."

"Is that sap back again! Just let him try to give me some pointers, the poor simp!"

"Well, if you don't learn, maybe he will."

Ananias smiled to himself when Mutt cursed under his breath.

AT the supper table that evening Orville was shown that he was still held in contempt. He was pointedly ignored by the crew. Perhaps some of the kindlier members might have wished to be easier, but Stone's injured air irritated them.

Men had refused to fight before this, but they had refused without trying to show their superiority. Orville's attitude was that of one who is abused—of the superior person enduring persecution from inferiors. While lumberjacks aren't sensitive they are able and willing to resent such an attitude.

Ananias felt sorry for the lad, but since he was in the wrong there was no sense in trying to defend him. Just before the close of the meal Jones said:

"Say, Stone, what made you think that Curran was hard on his team?"

Curran's swarthy face darkened. He awaited Stone's reply with a savage frown. Orville flushed.

"I've seen him handle his horses roughly. I just thought he might get better results in another way."

"*You* thought so, hey?" snarled Curran. "You, you. . . ."

"Easy, Mutt!" cautioned Jones. "Ever handle a team, Orville?"

"No, sir. But I know kindness does more than cruelty with other animals."

"That's right. I think Mutt's wrong myself. Well, gotta get to the office."

There were loud-voiced arguments from the bunk-house that night. Mutt's voice was loudest of all.

Jones had a long conference with Blanche that same evening. The conference brought out an argument almost as warm as that which took place in the bunk-house.

Before supper the following evening Ananias approached Orville.

"Blanche and I are going to drive over to the crossroads store, son. Come along?"

Orville accepted gratefully. He was obviously pleased to stay away from the bunk-house.

At seven o'clock the three climbed into Broadhurst's roadster, Orville driving. They drove down the rough logging road, upon the county highway. Jones then insisted upon taking the wheel.

FROM a half mile distant the motorists could see a half dozen loungers in front of the store. Ananias stepped on the throttle and roared up to the group, causing them to scatter in all directions.

He parked the car with a laugh and dived into the store. While he made some purchases he heard angry voices outside. Orville was receiving the brunt of the anger caused by the careless driving.

Jones watched from the window. Two well-known bums of the region were beside the car, shaking their fists and cursing at Blanche and Orville. The youngster was doing his best to placate the injured men, but his apparent fear was only making them more determined.

One of them made an insulting remark to Blanche. Jones clenched his fists, but stood firm. That was in the bargain. Blanche had to see what sort of stuff was in this nice lad whom she defended.

Ananias saw Stone's fair skin go red. The bums jeered him. Stone gave them some hot replies, but still sat at Blanche's side. Ananias saw him turn to Blanche and make an explanatory comment.

To Jones's disgust, Blanche nodded and patted the youngster's arm. Women! Dog-

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gone such unreasonableness. Applauding ideals in front of a pair of bums. If only those bums would force the issue.

But they didn't. Apparently they were satisfied that they had demonstrated their manhood by bluffing out the young man. They moved away and seated themselves on the steps of the store.

Jones waved a farewell to the clerk back of the counter and stepped outside.

"There's the driver!" said one of the bums, rising and approaching Jones. The second fellow joined him.

"Say, who d'you think you are, you dirty pup? What you mean, trying to run us over?"

Jones doubled his fist. Then an inspiration seized him. He shrank back.

"What's the matter?" he asked mildly.

"Matter!" shouted the second loafer. "You damn' near run us over on purpose, you skunk. Put 'em up and we'll teach you to use your brains a little."

Several other of the offended loungers approached and added their anger to that of their bolder companions.

ANANIAS suppressed a broad grin at the look of astonishment on his fiancee's face. Blanche was obviously dumbfounded at his meekness.

"I just did it for a joke, fellers," explained Jones lamely. "Cut it out now. I don't want any row in front of my girl."

The leader pushed Jones roughly as he tried to make his way to the car.

"Some girl you got to run around with a couple willie boys like you two. Put 'em up. We'll teach you some new jokes."

Jones had the face of a cherub. It now helped him to look like a real willie boy.

"Aw, cut it out now, fellers," he pleaded. "Can't you take a joke. I won't do it again, honest."

"You apologizin'?" demanded one of the men.

"Sure, sure. I didn't think you'd get sore. I never fight, you know."

The anger of the men gave way to contemptuous grins. They nodded to each other and let Jones pass, helping him with pushes.

Without casting a glance at Blanche or Orville, Jones climbed into the car. He didn't look up when one of the bums hurled a parting insulting remark at Blanche. He was about to throw the car into gear when one of the loungers, who had stayed out of the quarrel, approached.

"Say, you're Ananias Jones, ain't you?"

"That's me," returned Jones. He started the car.

"Well, I'll be everlastingly flabbergasted!" remarked the man loudly as the car moved away.

As they rode toward the setting sun the occupants of the car were silent. After an interval Blanche remarked tearfully:

"You let them insult me."

"Do you want me to go mixing up in vulgar brawls?" demanded Jones.

Blanche cast him a quick glance of anger.

"Are you trying to be funny again?"

"Ain't that just like a woman, Orv? She wants you to be a gentleman but I gotta be a roughneck all my life. Aw, hell!"

"Gentlemen don't swear and they don't let their sweethearts stand for insults either," returned Blanche hotly.

"Fighting is vulgar. Am I right, Orv?"

Orville rubbed his smooth chin thoughtfully. Blanche dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and studied her man's profile. She, too, looked thoughtful.

"IT'S a funny thing, Johnson," said Jones the next day as he swung through the woods with his assistant. "Things always look different when somebody else does 'em. Now last night I did just what Orville did, but it didn't seem right to either Blanche or Orville.

"It's the same when it comes to you and me. If I comb my hair it looks all right, but if you try to comb yours it looks like you're ready for a padded cell. Yessir, life is funny."

Johnson rubbed his bald pate and laughed.

"But will it do any good, Ananias?"

"Time for nature to take its course again. I can't tell yet. But I noticed that Blanche walked to the landing with Orville this morning. My, it's nice and fresh out, ain't it?"

Some minutes later Jones reached the decks of cedar poles. Orville Stone dropped his tools and came to him on the run.

"Say, Mister Jones, what did you mean

about those Arabs? Haven't I been playing the game?"

"Well, you've been playing your game, son, but maybe it's one they don't know a thing about around here. Now last night, seems to me, we were trying to play tennis against a football team. We didn't take the trouble to find out just what game those fellers were playing. After this I'm going to find out the game, and the rules first and then see if I'm willing to play."

"Is there a rule about borrowing tools?"

"Ask King over there."

Jones went on his rounds.

For several days thereafter Orville Stone was a much preoccupied young man. Often he consulted with Blanche Broadhurst. He paid the men of the crew almost no attention. Jones was curious to know just what was going on in the lad's mind, but Blanche did not enlighten him.

However, she was more humble in her attitude. She was considerate and affectionate toward Ananias; sometimes even respectful. Jones didn't flatter himself about his knowledge of women. He was a bit puzzled about it all.

ORVILLE came out of his shell as he rose from the supper table on Saturday.

"Say, Curran," he said as he rose, "maybe I don't know anything about handling a team, but I don't like your crooked mouth, anyway. If I were a horse I'd kick the stuffing out of you just for luck."

Orville's tone was casual. He smiled.

Curran dropped a forkful of pie as though it had suddenly become like a rotten egg. He stared at Stone unbelievingly.

"Wh-what's that?"

"You heard me."

Curran flung himself out of his seat.

"That settles it. I'm going to take you out and lick you if I have to drag you by the neck. I'm through lettin' you get away with murder around here."

"Don't worry. You won't have to drag me. I wasn't afraid to fight. I was just casting pearls before swine."

"Callin' me a pig on top of it, hey? Well, come on, mama's boy!"

Stone followed Curran out of the dining-shack to a space of hard-packed earth between the stable and the toolshed. The teamster slipped out of his shirt and stood waiting, his bare arms shining in the slanting rays of the sun. Orville followed the man's example.

Jones was among the rest of the members of the crew when the hostilities began. Even Broadhurst came out to look on. He was followed by Blanche, pale-faced, but determined to see what Orville would do.

Curran took the offensive. The long-endured resentment against Stone had to get into action without delay. Mutt, smiling happily, rushed.

Orville side-stepped neatly and drove a hard right to the back of Curran's ear. The force of the blow spilled the teamster into a heap. Orville refused the advice to follow up.

"Climb him, you crazy galoot, climb him!" shouted King, who was now strangely friendly toward Orville.

Curran scrambled to his feet with a laugh. He was met by a forest of sharp lefts and rights that forced him backward, his arms flailing wildly. The crew cheered Stone and hooted at Mutt.

The teamster found a breathing spell by kicking out savagely. Stone leaped back just in time.

"That's timber style, Orv," yelled Johnson. "Use all the weapons you got."

ANANIAS felt a touch on his arm.

"I think that's horrible," said Blanche.

"I think it's wonderful," returned Jones. "Better'n castor oil for babies. Orv's going to get fat on stuff like this."

Blanche moved away from him.

Curran was attacking again. He was holding his head up and boring in with quick swings. Stone was parrying the blows easily, but the teamster's heavy fists made him wince when they struck his bare arms.

And then Mutt kicked again, a quick woodsman's side-swing kick. It caught Stone above the knee and knocked him sprawling.

Curran shouted with glee and leaped. His shout turned to a yelp when Stone brought both legs up and caught his opponent on his shoes. A lunge of the legs and the teamster went rolling.

Stone, now thoroughly aroused to the seriousness of a woods scrap, followed up

his advantage by planting a healthy kick on Curran's thigh. The teamster rolled to his feet and slowly retreated, limping. Stone was also being slowed up by a limp.

But both men had lost their coolness. They closed in and traded punches. They were soon well marked up and bloody. A lucky swing caught Stone on the forehead and knocked him down. Curran was too weak to follow up.

"I'm going to stop that," said Blanche, again at Jones's side.

Ananias was angry. Blanche met his eyes defiantly for a moment and then ran to her home. Jones set his teeth and shouldered his way close to the fighters.

Orville was up again, but dazed. Another blow sent him sprawling. He lay struggling, but couldn't rise.

Curran staggered forward to finish the fight. Jones flung him aside.

"That's all, boys."

WITH Broadhurst's aid Orville was soon brought around. Curran sourly wiped the blood from his face and rubbed his leg gingerly. Stone saw him first of all.

"I'll lick you some other time, Mutt," he said.

Curran tried to grin.

"All right, Orv. Any time you say." He limped away.

"He called me Orv, Mister Jones."

"Yep. He knows the rules you played by. Better go in and wash up. Johnson'll rub you down. By morning you won't feel so bad."

It was long after the lights had gone out in the bunk-house that Jones heard a hesitating knock on the door of his office.

"Come in," he called.

"You come out," returned Blanche's voice. "There's a piece of the old moon looking over the hemlocks."

Jones went out. He walked with Blanche to a bench under the hemlocks near the tool shed. They sat down and looked in silence at the fat crescent in the sky.

"I'm sorry, Elmer. You were right, I guess. Maybe I held Orville back from his lesson. But I think fighting is low and mean." She kicked at a chip. "Are—are you going to punish me?"

Jones picked her up, put her on his knees and kissed her!

"Take that!" he said sternly. "And let's make some rules. My business is my business and yours is yours."

"Yes, sir. Punish me some more."

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State of New York, County of New York, ss:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Malcolm Reiss, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the NORTHWEST ROMANCES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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(Signed) MALCOLM REISS,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1942.

(Signed) GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1944.)

BOOMERANG BONANZA

By FREDERICK L. NEBEL

Jackson and Dongan were the original hard-luck twins. With a fortune in moose meat cached ready to sell, they couldn't get to it—for the way was blocked by a phony gold rush they had started themselves.

THE freeze-up was close at hand. The long, lean Arctic winter was throttling the primitive land in its talons of ice. The spirit thermometer was down to forty below and still dropping, and Dawson honkatonks were packed with bearded, boisterous and grimy men from the ends of the earth. Some there

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were who well knew the rigors of that bitter country; knew the stark loneliness of its unmapped, half-mythical trails; knew the nightmare of near starvation on the frigid polar rim under the weird death-dance of the ghostly northern lights. But many were cheechakos who tried to hide their rawness behind a chesty swagger and a reckless, devil-may-care manner of drinking and talking.

The stragglers were pouring in from the coast, weary and haggard, but with the gold fever burning in their eyes. The gruelling six-hundred-mile trek from Dyea to Dawson was no pleasure jaunt, and some who had left Dyea with high and mighty hopes of gouging raw gold from the pitiless Dawson country, died by the way. Some had died of pure exhaustion on the staggering grind over Chilkoot. Others had gone down in the mad whirlpools of White Horse, or in the cruel slush-ice of lonely Lake Labarge.

But Dawson welcomed the stragglers. It welcomed them with the news that drinks were a dollar a throw, moose-meat two dollars a pound, with beans at one and a half, and flour at two. The Tivoli Saloon was in full blast. The bar was jammed. Faro, roulette, stud- and draw-poker were doing a thriving business. The roof was the limit and frequently the roof was thrown off. Men swore with the grand carelessness of potential millionaires, and the room, heated by a big, red-hot stove, steamed with thawing furs and blanket-clothing.

"Bum-luck" Jackson, who stood six-feet-three in his siwash socks, weighed one hundred and ninety pounds, and was probably the lankest man between Dyea Flats and the Yukon, took a crack with his bony fist at the bar and said:

"Yes, sir, gents, when good luck was handed out I must ha' been sleepin' or somethin'. 'S fact. Why, say, even when I was borned, I mind me old man told me later the roof was leakin' rain, the doc sprained an ankle gettin' there, me grandmother scalded herself, our cow was struck by lightnin'; and' t' wind it up, me folks, who had their hearts set on a li'l' baby gal, got me instead. If you c'n beat that, I'll be a wall-eyed son of a lop-side malemute. Have a drink!"

He flapped his hand in the air, boomed to the bar-tender, and the four cheechakos gathered about him, shook with laughter and named their poison. He shifted a chew the size of a golf-ball, spat next to the cuspidor, and drew a hand across his bewhiskered chin. He had a lantern jaw, a beak of a nose all out of true and shaggy eyebrows that were always bent in a serious, though not ill-tempered, frown.

"Why," he was continuing, "they's no man like me. 'S fact! Take the time I was prospectin' on Moosehide Creek, over near Circle City. Injuns swiped me grub. Me pardner got sick. I started f'r Circle with him on the sled. The lead-dog got sore and ripped open the wheeler's throat. Next day another dog broke a tendon and I had t' shoot him. Same afternoon we got caught in a snow-slide, an' I busted me nose. Look at it! It's a disgrace t' any face. Then me pardner went crazy outta his head and shot part o' me ear off. See? Turrible! Come a blizzard that lambasted the livin' daylight outta us, and when I finally lugs me pardner into Circle he goes an' dies on me. He allus was a kind o' unthankful critter, Gawd rest his soul.

"An' that ain't all. Now I mind the time—'twas over at Cassiar Bar—"

"Bum-luck, it wasn't at Cassiar Bar. It was on the Porcupine, darn you!" a deep, good-humored voice rumbled at his elbow, and a broad hand thumped solidly on his shoulder.

BUM-LUCK twisted his head and looked into a pair of twinkling, keen blue eyes that were on a level with his own. The man behind the eyes was young, burly and good-looking in a rough-and-ready way. He had a stubble of black beard, and this was coated with pale frost that already was turning to silvery vapor. White teeth shone as the young man grinned, and a low chuckle rolled pleasantly in his throat.

Bum-luck threw up his long arms and brought them down on the man's shoulders. His frown disappeared, his pale eyes widened and shone with pure joy. His voice trumpeted—

"Dang your hide, Bart, so you got back! Lor' bless me heathen soul, you're a sight f'r sore eyes. Whatcha drinkin'? Come

on, have a drink. Huh, whatcha drinkin? Gents, me pardner, Bartholomew Dongan. Me *pardner,* gents!"

Dongan laughed, poked Bum-luck playfully in the ribs, and shoved up against the bar. Bum-luck draped his arms about his partner's neck, shifted his enormous chew, and hailed the bar-tender in his bull-voice.

Dongan gripped the lanky man's arm and said near his ear: "Listen, Bum. This is no party. I've just plugged in from Forty Mile and I've got something up my sleeve."

"Ho! Your arm, Bart? You can't fool me!"

"Now cut out the comedy, Bum. This is straight goods. Ditch these tin-horns and come on over to the cabin."

Bum-luck's face fell. He seemed disappointed. "Aw, shucks, Bart, let it hang f'r a while. I been entertainin' these gents an' enjoyin' meself. I loves t' talk, old husky, an' I don't get the chance often."

"You love to talk and spend your dust on any tin-horn 'll listen," said Dongan. "Now forget it, Bum. Sink your rum and come on over the cabin. We need money, and I've got an idea how we can make enough to live till the next big strike."

"Aw, s' look here, Bart—"

"Come on, Bum," insisted the husky man, tugging at his arm.

He swept up his whisky, said, "Here's to you, pardner!" and flung it down neat, rasping his cavernous throat.

Bum-luck downed his, opened his mouth to protest further, but Dongan hauled him away from the bar with firm but gentle persistence and headed for the door. The lanky man flung over his shoulder:

"See you later, gents!"

"No you won't," chuckled Dongan, opening the door and dragging his partner outside, while the four cheechakos whispered among themselves.

They rocked down the street side by side, their moosehide moccasins crunching rhythmically on the snow. The wind cut sharp as a knife, and their breaths spumed forth into the frigid air like streamers of thin smoke. By the time they reached their moss-chinked log-cabin, which was a ten-minutes' brisk walk from the Tivoli, their faces were red as two beets. Dongan lifted the latch and banged in, and Bum-luck, turning his head to take a tobacco shot, followed a split-second later, booted the door shut with his heel, and leaned back against it, a little disconsolate.

"Dang it, Bart," he complained, "you make me sick, you do. You can't let a critter enjoy hisself. You're allus chuck full o' energy, allus bangin' around some place, allus got ideas. Me, I reckon if I wanted t' lay down an' die peaceful, you'd be again' it or somethin'."

DONGAN, a young mountain of sheer vigor, swung a muscled leg over the corner of the table and pulled off his mittens, leaving them to dangle at the end of the strings which ran up to his neck. The dynamic energy of youth sparkled in his eyes, rang in his deep-toned laugh, was apparent in the little lumps of hard muscle that forever shimmered at the corners of his mouth.

"Bum," he chided, "I think you're getting old."

"Old me eyebrow!" retaliated the lanky man, glaring suddenly. "I'll be forty-eight come May the tenth."

"Then shut up and—"

"An' don't tell me t' shut up!"

"All right, then be quiet. And peel your ears. Listen! We're going to shake Dawson's dust from our heels and plug for the mountains."

"S'pose you're startin' another Squaw Creek stampede," essayed Bum-luck. "S' look here, Bart. If it's gold you better leave me out. I'm the original bum luck guy, an' I'm contagious as hell."

"Forget it!" scoffed Dongan. "Now tell me. What's the latest price on moosemeat here?"

"Two or two-an'-a-quarter. But that don't mean nothin', 'cause they ain't no moosemeat t' be had. Darn me, I been eatin' so much bacon o' late I beginnin' t' look like it."

All right, went on Dongan. "Say two dollars a pound. I've been poking around in the mountains, and I know where there's a herd of moose bulled up in a blind valley. Yes, sir, Bum. There's only one entrance to this valley, where they went in. Then, by an act of providence to mankind and you and me in particular, a hunk of ice, of I don't know how many tons, slides down from the peak and jams

in this entrance. There they are, eating moss and headed for starvation. It's our chance to make seven or eight thousand dollars and stay on easy street till there's another gold stampede. And we'll be warding off a meat famine in the bargain!"

"Wait a minute," cut in Bum-luck. "How the devil we goin' t' get this meat out if the valley's bottled up?"

"How? Why, wake up, pardner. This jam is only about thirty feet high. On the inside it's sheer — falls right away, which is why they can't climb out. On the outside we can climb up and make a rope ladder to go down the inside. Then we can haul up the meat bit by bit with a line and let it slide down the outside. We could use dynamite, but we're almost broke and 'll have to use what dust we have got to buy a few sleds and some old mongrels. We don't need fast dogs; just ones that 'll pull. I can get 'em near Forty Mile, and we'll buy them *after* we've got the meat cached. It'll save dog-grub and, anyhow, we don't need 'em before."

"Well"—Bum-luck dragged off his cap and scratched his head—"well, I reckon I got t' go. Only I wisht you'd get less ideas in that head o' yourn."

"But we need the money, Bum," argued Dongan.

"Ten t' one, with me along, somethin' 'll happen. I'm allus only one jump ahead o' Bum-luck an' sometimes I slip an' get overtook."

The burly man laughed. "Oh, forget it, pardner. It's imagination. Go out and buy some ammunition and plenty of heavy rope. I'll pack the sled meanwhile and we'll get under way in an hour. And don't tell a soul!"

"Yeah — awright," grumbled the lanky man. "But s'pose I jest stop in t' the Tivoli an' finish the story I was tellin' them gents. Won't take long. An' they was interested."

"Bum," said Dongan, standing spread-legged, "you stop in at the Tivoli and I'll re-break your nose."

"Ah-r-r, be your age. I'll — I'll —"

"Now, Bum, old pardner," chortled Dongan, as he crossed the room and took his friend's arm. "Cut out grumbling. Our bank's low and we want to get to that valley before somebody else accidentally gets there. Hop to it, old sourface!"

"S' look here! Don't call me sourface!"

Chuckling, Dongan thrust a couple of nuggets into Bum-luck's hand, pulled open the door and rough-housed him outside. Bum-luck stood glaring and grumbling and working his chew, while Dongan kept chuckling from the doorway. Then the old-timer spun on his heel and tramped off, trying hard to suppress a grin that would not be suppressed. Bum-luck was only happy when he could get a crowd around him, buy all the drinks, and relate his past misfortunes.

IT was a hard land in those days. It was a brutal land. It took a man and broke his back and spirit or made of him a better man than ever he was before. It gave no quarter and asked none. You had to stand up and fight back day in and day out, and if you were shaky on your pins you went down in less time than it takes to tell it, and nobody missed you. The Yukon trail was strewn with the bones of men who died in the name of gold. Some had the heart but not the strength, and others had the strength but not the heart.

Those who won through hung around the saloons as moths hang around a flame. They had come for gold, and they wanted nothing else. For gold they killed and lied. When a new stampede broke loose, the hordes tore out to stake their claims. The weak were trampled under foot, left to die of the bitter cold by the way; and men shot each other in the twinkling of an eye over a stake-line that might have been a hair's breadth out of the way.

Bart Dongan, who was rounding thirty lusty years, had come to the Northland five years back, after having been kicked out of college and, subsequently, out of a soft home. The salmon fisheries claimed him for a while, and later the lumber business. Though he came to the Klondike for gold, he was not swept up in the madness. He turned his hand to anything in order to keep the proverbial wolf from the door, and the many things he could think of toward such an end, sometimes drove his partner to distraction. Bum-luck was a lazy, indifferent, good-natured soul, while Dongan was a dynamo of energy,

with a brain that was forever planning new ventures.

And now they were trekking into the naked, glacial mountains, on the winter-locked rim of the universe. There were no strong woods to take the brunt of the ice-fanged wind. Trees grew in scattered clumps, and most of them were scrawny and naked. Black thickets straggled stark and skeleton-like across the glazed surface of the snow.

Six lean malemutes strained at ice-caked breast-bands and drew the heavily-laden ten-foot sled. A dozen feet ahead of the lead-dog, Dongan strode on short, broad snowshoes. Bum-luck sagged along behind the sled at the gee-bar. That part of his face below the nose was covered with a thin coating of frost, where his exhaled breath kept congealing. Even the faces of the dogs were sheeted with ice. Dongan's stubble was frosty, and little ridges of frozen rheum were under his eyes. Often he rubbed his nose vigorously with the palm of his mittened hand, and the returning blood circulation pricked like countless red-hot needles.

"Say," called Bum-luck, "reckon the bottom must be outta the thermometer."

Dongan stopped and looked around. The dogs stopped. Bum-luck stopped, discolored the virgin snow with a stream of tobacco that froze immediately.

"I'm spittin' brown icicles," he observed.

Dongan rocked back and stood beside him. "Mercury must be frozen stiff all right, Bum," he grinned.

"Doggone, if I didn't keep chewin' this 'baccy me jaws 'd freeze. I'm thinkin' how nice it 'd be settin' back in the Tivoli next t' the big stove."

"And telling the tin-horns about your bum luck," added Dongan, with a mischievous wink.

"You keep naggin' me about that, old husky, an' I'll sure spread your nose all over your handsome young mug. Why, by cripes, I feel like warmin' up on you now!"

"I was feeling the same, Bum," retorted Dongan, flexing his arms. "Bet you a pound of tobacco, to be paid next time in Dawson, that I can put you on your back."

"Bet's on!" boomed Bum-luck, dropping his dog-whip.

"Let's go!" laughed the burly man, squaring off.

THEY both lunged for each other, looked and began rocking back and forth. They did not dally with each other. Dongan spun his lank, powerful partner around in a terrific attempt to whirl him off balance. But Bum-luck thwarted the attempt and bore Dongan back across the snow under a sweeping charge that for a moment threatened to topple the younger man. Dongan stopped it, however, and the little lumps of muscle at the corners of his mouth bulged with the almost superhuman strength he exerted to check Bum-luck. Then, with a sudden movement, he dropped back and down to his knees, bored up under his partner, lifted him clear and heaved him over his head. Spinning about, he dived for Bum-luck as the latter sprawled on his back, landed solidly and flattened his partner against the snow in a hold that was not to be broken.

"Ugh—ah—um—ugh—" choked Bum-luck, his eyes bulging, his jaws working.

"Down? Are you down, Bum?" laughed Dongan.

"Ugh—y—eah—I—ugh."

Dongan jumped up, grasped his partner's hand and hauled him to his feet. Bum-luck ran around in circles, bent over at the waist, hacking and waving his hands. Finally he stopped, breathing hard, straightened up and rasped his throat, while his eyes watered. He put a hand to his mouth, and whipped away his wad of tobacco.

"Daggone, I—I almost choked t' death on that," he said. "I'll never wrastle you again with a chaw in me mouth."

"Ho-ho! You owe me a pound of tobacco, Bum."

"If it wasn't f'r me swallowin' that—"

"Grin, you old sour-face! Grin and bear it!"

"Darn you, don't call me sour-face!"

"Then grin. Show your teeth—"

"S' look here, Bart! You cut out makin' fun o' me. You know dang well I ain't got no teeth t' show. I—I—" The grin came much against his will, and flapping a hand at the burly man, he rolled back to the sled, sat down and gnawed off a fresh chew, trying to look

very angry again after the involuntary grin.

"Well, old timer," said Dongan, dropping his bantering mood, "I guess we'd better mush."

Bum-luck got up and threw his gaze about the ragged, unlovely wastes.

"Reckon we better, Bart, old husky," he replied.

There was never any bitterness between these two. Although at times they cursed each other, threatened to beat the stuffings out of each other, in each heart there was deep respect, one for the other. Dongan's brittle banter, and Bum-luck's tirades, were just so much excess steam blowing off. Once on a time Bum-luck had carried his partner through a howling blizzard with the mercury at fifty-five below, and on another time Dongan had nursed the old timer through the scurvy. They never talked about it because they were not sentimental men, but between them there was an unbreakable bond of friendship which each tacitly understood and never mentioned.

As they were about to start off, Dongan raised his hand, stared keenly over the back trail.

"Look, Bum!"

BUM-LUCK looked, and both saw a string of men and dogs topping a bare ridge in the distance. The two partners glanced at each other, frowned perplexedly, and again turned to watch the moving train of men and dogs.

"Looks like another stampede," observed Bum-luck.

"Say, Bum, you didn't hint to anybody in Dawson where we were heading, did you?"

"Naw, o' couse not. I ain't no fool. But you mind they was no hint time o' the Squaw Creek rush. A bunch o' critters slipped outta town mysterious. Another bunch saw 'em, an' before long they was a stampede. You mind how you drug me away from the Tivoli? Well, I'll bet me red shirt, the only one I got, that some critters there smelt a rat."

"By George, Bum, you may be right!"

"Sure, I may," declared Bum-luck. "Doggone, I never seen meself start on somethin' without Bum-luck trailin' me. Honest. I'm the bum-luckest critter—Why, dang me, I'll bet the other shirt I hope t' own some day that when I croak an' get buried it'll be just me stinkin' luck t' wake up when they's six feet o' sod on top o' me!"

"No Bum. If that's what started it, old timer, it was my fault for—"

"Nope. It's me, old husky, the bum-luckest sourdough that ever had the bum luck t' get hisself borned. Why, even that was a mistake. Me folks wanted a gal an' got me. Me last pardner died in Circle City, an' the one before that drowned hisself in the Stewart. I'm a accident, Bart. I'm a accident, that's allus happenin' t' someone else. I'm six accidents all rolled in one, an' a dozen mistakes. I was with you when you busted your ankle in the Tanana Hills an' that awful blizzard come. I goes an' gets scurvy an' ties you down when you should ha' been in on that big stampede. I could kick meself in the slats f'r bein' the bum-luck critter I am. I'm a hell-bent jinx, old husky!"

"Now shut up, Bum," clipped Dongan. "This is serious. They must have been following us since yesterday, hanging back. Probably the small bunch that started has been increased by the way and have given up the idea of hanging back. Blast the luck!"

"It's me, old husky. It's yours lovin'ly, Bum-luck Jackson, hisself in person, pleased t' meetcha. Start thinkin', Bart. Get your think-machinery grindin', an' figger a way t' shake this gang. I warned you not t' take me along. I—"

"Dammit, close your jaw, Bum!" ripped out Dongan. "You talk so much about bad luck, it's no wonder we get it. Look at them come!"

The horde surged down the distant slope in what appeared to be an endless line. Some had sleds and dogs and led the race. Others ran, slid, stumbled under light packs. On they came, with new figures continuously topping the bald knob of the hill and tearing down the ice-hummocked trail. There were young men and old men, boys of eighteen and grandfathers of sixty-odd; white beards and black beards and faces that were yet too soft to grow even a downy stubble. The big men bowled over the little men, and

nobody turned to lend a hand to those who fell and clawed at the snow and ice.

Gold was their god, and that god was the devil. It drove them to madness, to anger, to black hatred. Feet that once had known the feel of silk and patent leather and soft velvety rugs, now pounded the frozen trail in grimy socks and moccasins. Voices that once on a time had drawled philosophy and culture in the meditative atmosphere of library or drawing-room, were now coarse and brutish with the lust of gold and mythical millions.

"Let's mush a while," ventured Dongan.

"Let's, Bart," nodded his partner. "An' in the meantime keep thinkin' them thinks o' yourn."

Bum-luck took the lead and Dongan, taking up the whip, cracked it and helped the dogs "break" the sled from the frozen crust. The outfit moved forward, swinging down toward a stretch of muskeg, while the brittle Arctic air carried to their ears the maudlin yelping of harried dogs commingled with the shouts of men.

The leaders of the horde caught up with the two partners when they were working across the field of frozen, jagged muskeg. The first of the lot was "Chilkoot Charley" Hansen, a whale of a Swede who many times had lugged a one-hundred-and-fifty-pound pack over the muscle-tearing grade of Chilkoot Pass. Recklessly, he drove his team of six big Hudson Bay dogs, and shouted:

"Ha-ha! Vee seen you sneakin' out o' Dawson last night. By yumpin' yimminy, yah! Keep mushin', Bum-luck. Show us vere is it de new diggin's. Ay bane make a million dis time, yah! Den Ay go home to Marstand by the Skagerrack an' marry her mine Brunhilde. By yumpin' yimminy, yah!"

"Charley, you're all wrong," said Dongan. "We're not after gold this time."

"Ha-ha, Bart! Ay t'ink you are, yah. Mush!"

OTHERS came thundering up, raising clouds of fine snow, and milling around the two partners. Men snarled amongst themselves, just as the dogs snarled. With one team were two of the cheechakos to whom Bum-luck had been relating his misfortunes the day before.

"Hot on your trail, Bum-luck," called one of them. "Thought it damned funny the way your pardner pulled you away yesterday. Looks suspicious when a man comes in from the trail at forty-five below and then takes his pardner and goes right off again."

"Just as I thought," muttered Dongan near Bum-luck's ear. "Well, let's keep moving and see what happens. We'll steer clear of the valley for a while. Think of something, Bum, to shake them."

"That," replied Bum-luck, "is up t' you, Bart."

Dongan cracked his whip and Bum-luck ran up ahead of the team. They started off and the hungry horde crowded after them, singing and cursing with wild abandon. And while they sang and cursed one here, and another there, crumpled to the snow, clawed ahead on hands and knees, and finally collapsed. The others trooped by, their eyes, like their thoughts, fixed on the lanky man in the lead, who they thought was the key to their still unrealized and unreasonable hopes of fortune. Gold hunger gnawed at their brains even as food hunger gnaws at the stomach. In their immense singleness of purpose they swept away a thousand years of civilization from the book of time . The seed of their cave-dwelling forebears would not be downed. They were raw men on the raw white edge of the world, willing to sell their souls to the goddess of gold.

Dongan and Bum-luck plugged deeper into the crenelated mountains, each trying to think of some plan by which they could dissuade the horde from following them. At three in the afternoon the early twilight of the high latitudes began to fling out over the wilderness, and deeper darkness followed close upon its heels.

Dongan called his dogs to a halt, raised his hands and shouted:

"We'll stop and camp."

"No, by yimmy," argued Chilkoot Charley Hansen, rubbing ice particles from his bearded jaw. "Vee keep mushin', yah. De moon she kooms up dam' soon."

"That's the stuff," seconded a cheechako. "We'll mush 'till midnight."

"No. We'll camp now," was Dongan's idea, as he stood spread-legged.

The men milled about him, growling and waving their fists threateningly.

Bum-luck elbowed his way to his partner and they stood back to back.

"We'll camp now," stated Bum-luck, frowning darkly.

Chilkoot Charley lifted his rifle and slammed the muzzle against Dongan's stomach. A dozen other guns sprang into view, and the growls of the horde became more ominous.

"Ay t'ink we mush now, yah," rumbled the Swede.

Dongan and Bum-luck turned to regard each other. The lank man spat lazily and drew a hand across his mouth, still eyeing his partner.

"I reckon it's mush, then, old husky," he said. "These bums ha' got the drop on us."

Dongan nodded and uncoiled his whip, brushed by Chilkoot Charley and grasped the gee-bar of his sled.

"All right, you blasted fools!" he flung at the horde, and cracked the whip with a savage gesture over the dogs.

THEY lined out and continued through an arduous muskeg, while overhead in the darkening sky, pale stars began to wink and grow in number. The moon came up and flooded the naked land with its ghostly, silver radiance, and shadows paced the men and dogs as they swept onward through the Arctic night.

Dongan, taking the lead from Bum-luck, led the way up a steep hog-back, topped it and swung down into a valley where a narrow, frozen waterway meandered through scattered bunches of balsam. Some of the men faltered on the upgrade and finished on hands and knees, then let themselves slide down the other side, upsetting others and crashing into the dogs.

The burly young man reached the narrow creek and jogged along on its hard surface. Behind him men swore and dogs snarled viciously, but he did not turn his head. Presently he espied a dark blotch on the right-hand shore and toward this he steered. It proved to be the remains of a campfire.

"Bum," he called in a voice that most of the men could hear, "drive our center stakes here and I'll drive the corner stakes."

Bum-luck opened his mouth in frank amazement. Chilkoot Charley waved his arm and roared.

"Ha-ha! Dis is it. Say, Bart, how t' hell you find dis?"

"I picked up an old sourdough on the road to Forty Mile," explained Dongan. "He was dying and before he cashed in he told me about it." He put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a couple of nuggets. "This is a sample he gave me."

"By yumpin' yimminy!" exclaimed Chilkoot Charley, and dived off to cut his stakes.

The others left their dogs to curl up and followed his example. Axes rang and laughs boomed. Men crashed through the thickets, crashed into one another and lashed out with savage blows on general principles.

"Drive your center stakes, Bum," repeated Dongan to his still mystified partner.

"What—what the devil—" began Bum-luck.

But Dongan cut him short with—

"Don't stand there like a mummy. Get started!" And with that the burly man grabbed his axe and went off to cut and drive his corner stakes.

It was a night of pandemonium, of bitter arguments and sudden blows. Those who had driven their stakes flopped down exhausted near their dogs, rolled up in their robes and slept 'till the first thin streak of dawn. Some did not stop to sleep, but started right back for Dawson to register their claims and get supplies.

When the last of the horde had gone, Dongan yawned awake, sat up and found Bum-luck regarding him with a dubious frown. The burly young man rubbed his jaw and grinned slowly, winking a mischievous eye. Then he heaved to his feet.

"Well, Bum, let's get started for that valley before those moose die of starvation or somebody else spots them."

"But, you old husky, what about this?"

"Oh, this!" Dongan chuckled. "I had to get rid of those birds somehow. I was wondering if they'd fall for it. I camped here one night. This was my fire. Gold? Don't you believe it. I just staked here so as they'd follow me and then we could get rid of them."

"Well, you son of a gun!" howled Bum-luck, and for once he grinned, from ear to ear, without being urged.

A WEEK later Bum-luck sat atop the ice jam in the blind valley and watched four teams of dogs running toward him with empty sledges. He spat with satisfaction and looked down at the mound of moosemeat which soon would be sold in Dawson.

The two partners had hauled the meat up over the jam by means of a stout rope attached to the traces of their six-dog team. Bum-luck had worked on the inside, and Dongan, adding his strength to that of the dogs on the outside, had managed to haul over three-hundred pounds at a time. When all the meat was outside, Dongan had gone off to hire or buy as many teams as he could secure.

And now he was returning with three teams besides his own. Bum-luck climbed down from the top of the jam, and a little later Dongan arrived at the head of his team, with the three other teams, along with three Indian drivers, close behind.

"All fixed, Bum," called the burly man. "I didn't have to go far. Struck a camp I didn't expect to find and hired these teams."

Bum-luck rubbed his hands together and looked cheerful.

"Now, dang me, I c'n squat in Dawson f'r a while an' enjoy meself," he said. "An' look here, Bart. If you go thinkin' up any more ideas I'm goin' to smash you f'r sure."

Dongan grinned and wagged a finger at his partner.

"Remember, Bum, you owe me a pound of tobacco already."

"Ah-r-r, go away with you!" grumbled Bum-luck good-naturedly.

They set to work immediately loading the sleds, piling the meat high and solid and arranging to carry their personal equipage on their backs, to conserve space. At noon they were ready to start. They cooked a hearty meal for themselves and the Indian drivers, and broke trail custom by feeding the dogs in the middle of the day.

At one o'clock they started for Dawson under a dull, portentous sky that appeared pregnant with snow. The harness creaked, the heavily laden sleds crunched over the snow, and the two white men plodded under the weight of their packs. They were just an hour on the trail when snow began to fall.

"Looks dirty," observed Dongan, throwing an eye across the brooding heavens.

"Oh, we ain't in Dawson yet, old husky," replied Bum-luck, wagging his head. "Don't f'get that Bum-luck Jackson is with you, an' he draws bum luck like a wet tree draws lightin'."

"Now my remark didn't call for an oration, Bum."

"Anyhow, I'm tellin' you what's what."

"Oh, shut up."

Bum-luck shifted his chew. "S' look here. I don't like bein' told t' shut up thataway."

"Well, then, be quiet," said Dongan.

"All right, but don't tell me t' shut up."

FOLLOWING this brief exchange of words, the two partners busied themselves aiding the dogs over a series of bad hummocks. Later, crossing a frozen swamp, Bum-luck, who was in the lead, broke through an air hole and sank in water to his knees. Swearing a sizzling blue streak, he was hauled out by the two nearest Indians, while Dongan hastened to build a fire.

"Holy smokes, hell, dammit and dog-gone!" raved Bum-luck. "If we ever get this meat t' Dawson I'll drink myself deaf, dumb, an' blind, marry six squaws and grow a Chinese pig-tail!"

"Now, Bum," said Dongan, hacking at the old timer's already ice-caked footgear. "Take it easy, pardner."

The Indians tended the fire while Dongan removed Bum-luck's moccasins and socks and began rubbing the numb legs and feet with snow. When the prickling sensation of circulation was felt, Bum-luck squirmed and made a wry face, and little by little Dongan drew the feet toward the warmth of the flames.

Twilight was already lowering, and they made their camp there for the night. Next morning Bum-luck was in good shape again, and they started with the first faint color of dawn. The day passed with snow still falling and the dogs wallowing to their bellies. The men's parkas were sheeted with ice that crackled as they moved, and icicles hung from their hoods, while their beards were white with frost.

No misfortune occurred all day, so it

was inevitable that over the campfire that night Bum-luck should tell of misfortunes that had befallen him in the full years behind. Dongan fell asleep listening, and Bum-luck then addressed the Indians. And when they fell asleep he grumbled his chagrin and rolled in his own blankets, while the dogs chewed ice lumps from their bruised feet.

Next morning the snow stopped falling while breakfast was making, and all the lonely wilderness lay entombed and beautifully silent. The vastness of it all was appalling, and made man feel finite and futile in the face of its lordly omnipotence.

The outfit moved with its burden, pushing slowly but doggedly through the fantastic drifts, down, steadily down, toward lower country.

That afternoon, when the cold, gray twilight was again sweeping over the land, they plodded into Dawson. Faces appeared at cabin windows, and then those faces came to the doors. Men stopped and looked and asked, and Bum-luck replied:

"Meat — moosemeat. Two dollars a pound. In God we trust; all others cash. Two dollars a pound—no bargains."

They stopped in front of the Tivoli, and the two partners, telling the Indians to remain by the sleds, strode into the saloon and on up to the bar. The place was crowded, and most of the men appeared to be in particularly high spirits.

"Moosemeat!" roared Bum-luck. "We got plenty of it t' sell, an' we're in the market at two dollars a pound—cash in gold!"

"Hurray!" the crowd yelled.

Out of the mob broke Chilkoot Charley Hansen, his huge face beaming. He smashed into the two partners and clapped his ponderous hands on their shoulders.

"By yumpin' yimminy!" he boomed. "Why t' hell ain't you on dat claim? Ay bane yust koom in f'r axtry grub. Averybody he bane get rich. Son Ay go back to Marstand by de Skagerrack an' marry her mine Brunhilde."

"Huh?" gulped Bum-luck. "What's 'is, huh?"

Chilkoot Charley dug a hand into his pocket and thrust a nugget as large as a walnut under Bum-luck's nose.

"Yah, look! Vee all be rich like hell! De creek have no name, so vee call her Bum-luck Creek. Yah! You sell me some moosemeat—yah. Yompin' yimminy, Ay knowed you vass make a strike!"

Bum-luck spun on his partner.

"Bart, did—did you know—?"

"Not a thing, Bum," replied Dongan, quite as awestricken as the lanky man. "So help me, Bum, I just did it to—"

"Then f'r Lord's sake, file our claim!" broke in Bum-luck. "I'll sell the meat to the trader. Oh, bless me heathen soul! If this ain't the limit!"

He gripped his partner's arm and lunged outside to the dog teams. He stopped there, took Dongan's hand and pumped it furiously. The burly man finally broke into a grin, pulled his hand loose and took a playful jab at the lanky man's jaw.

"Now, darn you, Bum," he said, his blue eyes sparkling, "if you ever mention hard luck again to me, I'll just naturally tear your old hide to ribbons."

"Ho! Ho!" roared Bum-luck. "The bad luck must ha' broke at last. Bart, I'll get me a new red shirt. I believe in Santa Claus, pink elephants, the Klondike an' Dawson likker! An' Bart, old husky, I'm goin' t' give you *five* pounds o' 'baccy an' t'-night I'm goin' t' squat in the Tivoli an' talk me head off."

"What, Bum, about your bum luck?"

"Shucks, no! About all the good luck I'm goin' t' have from now on. I'm a scraggly old wolf what's got religion, an' it's me night t' howl! An', old husky, how—I—am—goin'—t'—*howl!*"

LAST BOAT TO OUTSIDE

By H. J. McCABE

Eastman fought down the snowy Kobuc trail toward the last boat for Outside. He had an hour's trek; the boat sailed in fifteen minutes—and waiting in ambush were merciless killers.

Eastman staggered, swaying like a drunken man.

FIVE miles from the ice-bound summit of Signal Peak, Jim Eastman pulled up short at the edge of a snow and rock slide that blocked the Kobuc River trail. It was not the slide that halted him, although he knew enough about the North to realize that a sudden jar, a shout, a revolver shot might start a deadly avalanche

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on the overhanging icy mountain slope.

He'd take his chance in a slide, but —somewhere out there on the four hundred feet of boulder-strewn incline skulked "Bull Ape" Poole and "Slippery" Kip, two of the most vicious bandits Alaska had known in years. They were fleeing from the upper Kobuc mining country where a series of trail robberies and murders had made them "wanted men."

Riley, the roadhouse keeper at Reed, had warned Jim that the two desperados were only a few hours ahead of him on the way to Signal Peak Landing. And, in the heavy pack on Jim's back was ten thousand dollars in gold dust he had spent two dog-weary years digging from his claim up the Kobuc.

The Kobuc trail, clinging to the side of steep, rugged mountains covered with the first winter snow, was at best a possible death trap. But it was the only direct outlet from the upper Kobuc mining country to Signal Peak on Kotzebue Sound, calling point for all boats to that isolated region. Jim Eastman had no choice but to take it in spite of the added menace of the two bandits.

To circle the slide at a lower level would take at least two hours and those two hours would probably mean missing the *Sea Gull,* last boat for the Outside. Exhausted by the forced pace he knew that he could never make the seventy-mile back-trail to Reed.

There was nothing to it but to face the two bandits and hope for a lucky break.

GRIMLY Jim stepped out of the snowshoe harness, strapped both snowshoes to his pack and belted his holstered .44 on the outside of his parka.

He moved forward cautiously a few steps. Again a few steps. Blocks of ice half-covered with snow and dirt made the going slippery and treacherous.

"Reach for the sky, yuh!"

The sharp command came from behind a boulder forty feet ahead.

Jim dived to the left, hurling his body behind an embedded rock.

Swiftly he slipped off his pack, jerked out his .44. Squirming along the slide he reached the end of his shelter farthest from where he had leaped. Here concealed by moss that crowned the rock, he raised his head. He could see the tip of a parka hood and the barrel of a six-shooter that was covering the point where he had disappeared.

"Come outa that. Stick 'em up. We got yuh covered," snarled the unseen bandit.

Jim's body stiffened. His fingers gripped the gun butt. "Come and get me," he growled under his breath.

Narrowed eyes caught a slight movement. Flipping up the .44, Jim ripped out two lead slugs, one at the barrel of the six-shooter, the other at the parka hood. The six-gun jerked from sight, the parka hood disappeared and he heard a gruff voice swearing viciously.

Far up the rugged slope a rock, dislodged by the echo of the shots, clattered downward. As he glanced up the mountain side Jim's body relaxed weakly, his face paled under the weather-tan. He feared the start of a slide—a crushing mass of snow and earth. The rock bounced against an upflung ledge and stopped.

Digging in his toes Jim tensed his muscles to leap forward, drive his attacker into the open.

Rolling stone behind! Jim Eastman whirled and instantly ducked sideways to dodge the descending flash of steel.

The gun barrel thudded down on his right arm, momentarily paralyzing the muscles. His .44 clattered to the ground.

Hooking out with his left arm Jim Eastman's fist caught this new attacker on the jaw and knocked him whirling. An uppercut that started at Jim's shoe tops sent the bandit's gun spinning through the air. Then, a crashing blow from above dropped Jim like a log.

"KICK 'im in the ribs. That'll bring him outa it. Douse 'im with snow." The words came faintly to Jim's ears.

He felt the hard impact of a foot in his side. A handful of snow was smashed down on his face. Sharp pains darted through his body as another kick thudded against his side. Under closed lips his teeth gritted. He tried to clench his fist and swing upward at the bandit face hovering above, but his weakened body-muscles would not respond.

"I told yuh not to put him out, Slippery," growled Bull Ape Poole.

"Why not? If I hadn't beaned 'im, where'd yuh be?"

"Yeah, that's yuh all over. Can't use yuhr head. Always bumping 'em off the first thing. Sure, we'll kill this bird, but not yet, Slippery. Keep him awhile an' use him. Lookit this pack. He can carry it an' break trail for a coupla gents that want to get the last boat for the Outside."

"Yuh win," admitted Slippery and, stooping down, massaged Jim's face none too gently with snow.

"Kick 'im again — for me," growled Poole. "That's enough. His eyes is open. Get up, yuh!"

Jim struggled to his feet. He swayed dizzily. Vague forms whirled mistily before his eyes. He braced his feet, shook his head to clear the cobwebs. Poole's ugly face sprang into sight. Jim's hand darted to an empty holster.

"Yuhr little .44 is safe in my pack," sneered Poole. "Yuh won't need it."

He motioned to his pal: "Slippery, yuh an' me'll saunter 'long behind while this gent breaks trail an' packs out our just recent gold strike."

Slippery Kip, nervously fingering the trigger of a .44, glided to Poole's side. "Slippery" he sure was. Pale face, shifty eyes, the springy movement of a city gunman.

Poole kicked Jim's pack: "Hoist that pack o' yuhrs an' mush," snarled Poole.

Still dizzy, Jim adjusted the pack on his shoulders and moved out across the slide. Every step tore at the bruised muscles in his side. What a fool he had been to think he could fight through these two thugs with a ten-thousand-dollar pack of gold dust.

Across the slide they harnessed on snowshoes and swung up the trail. The fine, dry snow whined under their feet.

The trail was steep, skirting sheets of ice clinging by an eyelash to the slopes above. At their feet were huge nameless canyons hundreds of feet deep.

Desperately as he struggled along under the pack, Jim fought down the impulse to turn back and rush the bandits, risking everything on their being off guard because of the difficulties of the trail. But reason restrained him. As long as the gold was on his back there was a chance.

Three miles of aching lungs and tortured muscles. Only two miles now to the summit of Signal Peak. Ahead were the jagged spires where the mountains ceased on the shore of Kotzebue Sound. Behind were mysterious desolate peaks guarding trackless wastes.

Jim heard Poole and Kip breathing hard. The bandits were trail-soft! With an effort that tortured his aching body Jim increased the pace, heading into deep drifts, deliberately picking the toughest going.

He'd walk them off their feet. When they fell from exhaustion he'd have 'em easy.

A bullet nipped his parka hood, another kicked up the snow at his heels. "Slow up!" Poole bellowed angrily.

JIM stopped, swaying on his feet, blind with fatigue. But alarm stiffened his body as almost below their feet a field of snow crashed down with lightning speed. Boulders as big as cabins were torn from foundations and the destructive mass thundered to a stop two thousand feet below.

"Want to get plugged—in the back?" Poole demanded. "Yuh go like I say, see? Yuh don't an' down in one o' those slides for yuh."

"We gotta get that last boat," gasped Jim.

"Yuh should worry 'bout the boat. Yuh're goin' to be scrapin' th' frost off old Signal's top when we step on that boat."

So that was it! After he packed the heavy sack up the trail to Signal's summit they would be through with him. From the summit it would be down hill for four thousand feet or more to the very shore of the Sound.

Jim's muscles seemed to collapse. His fighting spirit was gone. Why go on? If he dropped in the trail he'd merely hasten by a few minutes the death he could not escape. Every breath was drawn from raw lungs. But—the pack was on his back. He still had the gold. He staggered forward.

A half-mile from the summit Poole ordered Jim to halt. "Yuh take the lead, Slippery. I'll travel in the rear." And he grinned suggestively.

The pace slowed greatly as Kip ploughed

ahead through the snow. A thousand feet more and then the summit.

The trail swung around an arm of the mountain. Down below spread the steep slopes of Signal Peak, seeming to merge with the waters of Kotzebue Sound.

A low-hung fog bank clung to the water, almost to the shoreline. The trail shot downward six hundred feet at a dizzy angle, clinging to the snow-covered slopes until it disappeared in a draw. A hardly distinguishable ribbon, it appeared on the side of the draw as it switchbacked from rim to rim.

From far below, deadened by the low-hanging fog-bank, the hoarse whistle of the steamship *Sea Gull* signaled three times for the Signal Peak landing.

Jim stopped abruptly. He had to make that boat! Desperation steeled his body. His ears strained for some sound of Poole's movements, his eyes clung to Kip.

AS if the solemn hooting of the whistle was an agreed-on command Kip jerked up his .44 and covered Jim Eastman. That is, he covered the spot where Jim had stood a second before.

With Kip's movement toward the butt of the .44 Jim threw his body sidewise and kicked upward with his snowshoes. As Jim had guessed, the snowshoes tripped Poole leaping toward him, a six-shooter grasped in his hand; a hand that was swinging downward in a crushing head blow.

A bullet zipped past Jim's parka hood. At the crack of the gun he dived for Poole's sprawled body, using the gorilla hulk as a shield from Kip's gun fire.

Before Poole had caught his breath Jim grabbed the man's outstretched gun arm; exerting all his strength he twisted. Poole's fingers slowly released their grasp on the butt. Jim's right hand darted to the .44. He flipped up the barrel, pulled the trigger as Kip lunged forward.

Too late! Kip's gun barrel crashed on Jim's head. He sprawled helpless on the trail.

Kip swore and with a vicious click thumbed back the hammer of the .44.

"Don't shoot 'im," snapped Poole. "Don't want bullet holes in him."

"He's got it comin'," Kip's finger tightened on the trigger. "He 'bout got me when he let loose with yuhr gun. Singed my ribs."

"Yuh heard me," barked Poole. "Don't shoot. We got the dust. This killing is goin' to be a accident. Slips an' cracks his dome on a rock, see? He'll be frozen like a board before we reach the deck of the *Sea Gull*."

"He's got it comin'. I oughta plug 'im an' slide 'im down the mountain."

"Yeah," snapped Poole, "an' start a slide that'll carry out the trail."

Poole slipped the pack straps free of Jim's shoulders.

"Anyhow," argued Kip as he kicked viciously at Jim's unprotected body, "I oughta smash his head with a rock. He burned my slats an'—"

"Shut up an' lissen, Slippery. Get this pack sack down to that flat rock. Boost it on top of mine. In a hour that *Sea Gull* drifts across the bay. If she gets no signal, she'll steam South. Miss her an' it's curtains for us. See?"

"Yeah, I suppose so!"

Poole and Kip dragged the pack to the flat rock. Jim heard Kip grunt as he lifted the pack sack. Returning strength was seeping through Jim's muscles. Risking detection he raised his head an inch or so and blinked the snow from his eyes.

Poole was standing near the rock adjusting the stolen pack above his own while Kip balanced the cumbersome weight and buckled the head strap. When they looked his way Jim was sprawled as they had left him.

Despair engulfed him. He was done for. If he let go the cold would finish him. Why not? It wouldn't be too bad—frost stealing over his body. Pleasant—drowsy—dreams—

But down the trail he visioned Poole and Kip bearing with them the gold he had fought the terrors of the North to gain. He dragged himself to his feet and stood swaying.

Slowly, painfully he drew up a hand, brushed the snow from his eyes. Indistinctly he saw the slope of Signal extending to the Sound. Yes! There they were. Poole and Kip, two tiny specks, as they followed the winding trail from slope to slope of the draw.

The *Sea Gull's* fog horn sounded again—three, long-drawn hoots. Close in. Not

more than a mile off shore. Gun shots echoed from below. Kip and Poole giving the landing signal. The *Sea Gull* answered.

Poole and Kip were safe. Shortly they would be on their way south with ten thousand in gold dust. Jim Eastman was standing helpless at the summit of Signal, an hour of trail between him and the landing.

He staggered on his feet, swaying like a drunken man. He felt his throbbing head. "Luck. One o' the breaks," he muttered. "Double hood—saved my dome."

The sharp wind nipped his cheeks. He swung his arms, stamped his feet to start circulation. His nose and cheeks buried in the snow had luckily escaped frost bite.

"Gotta get that boat," he muttered thickly. "Gotta get my dust."

He started to stagger through the waist-deep snow. He drew up abruptly, sneering at his own craziness. He crumpled down on the trail, his bruised head throbbing as he realized now the barrier between him and the safety of the *Sea Gull.*

He knew he couldn't go on.

Over three thousand feet of snow-clogged trail—and his snowshoes gone. Poole and Kip had beaten him. The country had beaten him. He trembled as from fever—old, burned out, weak.

The short spurt, however, had cleared his head. There was one chance—one desperate chance! He lumbered to his feet shaking the clinging snow from his parka hood.

Stumbling over buried rock, painfully stamping down the snow he struggled along the trail, scanning the snow banks below and above.

He reached the head of the draw that the trail followed to the shore of the Sound. It was a huge, steep cleft in the side of Signal. The sides were piled high with snow. The bottom, if one could call the dizzy depression a bottom, was clogged with twenty feet of snow poised ready for a lightning, bullet plunge down the mountain. A sudden jar would pull the trigger.

Only where the trail followed narrow ledges, swung and dipped back and forth from slope to slope was there a break in the almost perpendicular shoot.

Where the draw spread out at the bottom, five or six hundred feet wide, the trail crossed, full width, before it ended on the shore of the Sound. Poole carrying the pack of gold strode into slight; twenty feet behind plodded Kip.

Jim studied a point twenty feet below the trail where a block of partly frozen snow and ice rested on the surface. His one chance! He pulled his parka hood closer, crouched, tightened his muscles to leap. Then trembling, dizzy, he drew back from the edge of the trail.

He couldn't! Who knew what would happen to a man in the midst of thousands of tons of crushing snow? Death by freezing and starvation up here on the mountain would be slow agony but there would be no brutal grinding ice, no frantic struggle for breath under bone-crushing weight.

Poole and Kip were more than half way across the mouth of the draw. Another hundred feet and they would be safe from any slide that might come from above.

THE hooter on the *Sea Gull* boomed out of the fog only half a mile off shore. Again Kip shot, and the *Sea Gull* answered.

The crew would man a boat and put in for the shore to pick up the two bandits. Fifteen or twenty minutes this would take. Then, fearing the closing of the slush ice, the crew would speed back to the *Sea Gull,* disappear in the ghostly fog. The desolate shores of the Sound would not see another human being until Winter's deadly grasp was broken.

Fifteen minutes! And an hour of snow-clogged trail lay between him and the Sound. Beaten! He was beaten! A dry sob choked his throat. The slide was his one hope and he couldn't make it.

His face turned deadly pale as he recalled digging an unfortunate prospector from a small slide on the Kobuc. The man, broken and bleeding, had died before he could carry him to his cabin.

He could see his own body bleeding, head crushed into an unrecognizable pulp. Legs broken and torn, buried in ice. Or worse, he might be pinned helplessly under a mass of boulders, slowly dying as hour by hour his suffering increased.

Jim's muscles tightened in a rush of hot anger. He leaped from the trail.

He landed squarely on the block of frozen snow. Instantly the bottom fell out of the mountain side. Jim was thrown to his knees. Before he could flatten out, his body was pitched forward to the very edge of his frozen raft.

He dug in with his toes, clawed the snow with his fingers. Well he knew, if he slipped from the matted block of snow his chances were one in a thousand of reaching the bottom safely.

Plunging waves of snow thundered from above. He was blinded and fighting for breath. Would the gigantic sweep of the slide whip him into the freezing slush ice of Kozebue sound? Half unconscious he clung to the mass of ice, still miraculously whole.

MOTION ceased abruptly. Deathly silence that beat against the ears. To his right he saw a faint glimmer of light. He dug fiercely. In a minute his hand broke through the surface. He worked his body free, dug out the snow that choked his parka hood, and gazed around at a white field spotted with boulders and chunks of ice spreading to the very water of the Sound.

The click of oar locks floating from out of the fog on the Sound spurred Jim to action. He worked his legs free. With a kind of amazement, he knew that they were whole and sound.

For a time he could not think and a ringing in his ears made his head swim, but with an effort he gathered his reeling senses. There was something he must do!

On the broken expanse of the slide there was no movement. Over near the base of Signal Peak was the opening of the draw at which the sweep of snow had caught Kip and Poole flat-footed.

More dead than alive he crawled over the rough mass of ice, struggling through soft depths of snow, searching for the dark spot that might be a part of an arm or pack sack.

Then, he saw a gloved hand sticking through the snow. He dug furiously. Kip's head was uncovered, lolling heavily upon his shoulder. He was dead.

Jim searched in widening circles. Huge chunks of snow-ice made the search difficult. Minute after minute passed and he found no spot on the slide that might cover a body.

The louder click of oar locks muffled voices through the fog. Jim strained his throat to answer but only a hoarse croak issued from his swollen lips.

He slipped on chunks of ice as he floundered through the snow. He clawed at every patch that might conceal the pack sack. The circle of search was wide now, too wide, if—

He found Poole smashed against a block of snow-ice. Dead, with a sneer on his ugly face. The ten-thousand-dollar pack was on his back.

Jim slipped the strap from the dead bandit's shoulders, hoisted the burden on his back and, weaving like a drunken man, made for the shore.

A surge of relief warmed Jim's tired body when he saw the beached boat from the *Sea Gull*. The crew were on shore, stamping feet and waving arms to keep up circulation.

Their eyes opened in wonder when they saw the bruised, blood-stained face of the man that staggered toward the boat.

"Any more passengers?" asked the sailor in charge, gazing suspiciously toward the slide.

"Just myself," Jim croaked in a weak voice. "Yuh might report at Juneau that Bull Ape Poole an' Slippery Kip wanted to be passengers. Now they're dead—out there. I had to stop 'em. Alaska deputies up the Kobuc—will be glad to know."

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Two guns crashed; Lanier's blazing straight from the stage at the murderous gambler.

THE HE-WOLF'S WHELP

By DEX VOLNEY

Lanier was the fanged-mouth whelp of a murdered lobo sire, and he stalked his revenge on the McCade clan. What he hadn't figured was that a wolf-trap is always set—and the hunters kill a pup before it can become a wolf.

"THEY'RE comin'!" muttered Arnold Lanier to himself, his cigaret glowing between his wind-seared lips. His eyes, bloodshot from loss of sleep, squinted across the windrowed surface of the snowfields and granite ridges to a string of distant, moving, black specks. "They've got me spotted in my hole and they're comin' to wipe me out with hot lead. For shootin' Harry McCade in th' back, they'll say afterward."

Harry McCade had been plugged in the spine. No one knew who had done it, but when they found him Arnold Lanier was standing over the dead body. Now they were coming after him to end a blood feud dating back to the first stampede days.

Twenty years before, when he was a raw kid, he had tangled with the first McCade. Old Judson McCade it was. He had signed Lanier on to prospect on a

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grub-stake, and when he had found gold at Circle and covered a million-dollar claim, McCade, with his prospector's contract had snatched it away.

"Party of th' first part does th' mushin', th' freezin', and th' prospectin'; party of the second part takes everythin' with foxy writin' in th' contract," Lanier had stated it. Now, if he lived to be a thousand, he could never steal enough from them to square what he believed they had crooked him out of. He could never even up.

Now they were mushing across the snowfields in search of him. Out to get him for a killing that he would bet his meager poke had been done by their own renegade kin, Luke McCade. To rid Alaska of the last Lanier.

YOUNG Clifford appeared in the doorway. He and his father were the only ones left now. Tattered remnants of a powerful family. He did not see the McCades coming over the glacier. He did not notice the hate and fear in his father's eyes.

"Grub's ready, paw."

Clifford Lanier was about nineteen. His features, bronzed from facing the icy blasts that screamed up the slopes from the frozen wastes of the Bering Sea, were fine and smooth, though a bit pinched looking. His jaw was well shaped and strong, the mouth was sensitive, the nose slightly aquiline. A pair of straight-gazing hazel eyes looked out from under heavy, level, black brows. His hair was the color of a cow's wing, of good texture, waving a little. Slim, straight as a ramrod, he would have looked well in the lace and velvet and sword of some Virginia cavalier; instead, he wore shaggy ill-fitting garments of caribou skin.

His father was still gazing off across the white slopes into the cold blue-rose of the Alaskan morning. From that shack, on the edge of a booming glacier nicknamed Devil's Desk by the sourdoughs, Lanier could see for miles across the titanic mountain wilderness of the peninsula. And far to the south, on a sloping white snowfield moved that ant-like procession, which the senior Lanier knew were teams of wolf-dogs driven by hard-faced and heavily armed men.

Lanier's gaze shifted to the sledge at his side on which were still lashed two dozen blue-fox pelts he had stolen during the night down on the Pacific side of the peninsula, below the mighty spine of the white ranges he knew so well. The pelts were still wet, the bundles were covered with powdery snow, for this was March and he had mushed through a blizzard with his loot.

Raising his hard bloodshot eyes, Lanier turned partly around and looked at his son. The savage lines in the fox-thief's stern face softened, his eyes grew misted. Then with an effort of will, he disguised the tenderness of his expression with a deepening of the bitter lines in his features. He twisted his mouth and spoke with a forced harshness.

"Lot of help you are to a man," he growled. "Too proud-hearted to help me snare blues from the men that's ruined me; won't even stop readin' books long enough to fix a decent meal. String out some fresh dogs an' mush to Three-Mile Larsen's, down th' Kalvik trail. Borrow his tools for reloadin' 30-30 rifle cartridges. I'm near out of shells—an' I ain't in no notion to go down into th' settlements right now."

"You've got about a hundred," protested Clifford. Then swift anxiety and solicitude leaped to his eyes. "What—what is it? Are they after you? Are they on the way here—"

"No—not yet," lied the older Lanier, blocking the view of the distant drivers. "Nobody's on th' way here—but they might come later." Arnold Lanier suppressed his savage despair under an unnatural harshness that startled and bewildered his son. "Man's got to have plenty shells, an' Larsen's reloadin' outfit is first class. Go get it. Don't fiddle along th' trail dreamin' like some girl neither, Cliff. Mush out those dogs."

CLIFFORD LANIER obeyed in silent haste. Nameless, inexplicable fear gripped him. It was almost terror. Something was going to happen; he sensed that. The nearness of disaster bore strangely upon him. He gazed again at his father, who forced a faint smile on his dark lips as he gestured down the trail.

Clifford trailed out his dogs and drove off. As he swung around the black foot of a small precipice, he looked back once.

Arnold Lanier's squat strong frame leaned now against the doorway, the black mane hanging like an animal's hair about his face. Two cartridge belts were about his strong hips; and a high-powered rifle rested in the crook of his arm. The man's dark jaws crunched caribou meat and sourdough bread. In one hand was a tin mug full of coffee heavily spiked with whiskey.

Because Clifford Lanier's trail took him in a northeasterly direction, he could not see the lines of moving black specks that came across the mighty expanse of the Devil's Desk, to the south. Otherwise he would have stayed out of love for the bitter, brooding, black-haired man who had imbued him with a passionate hatred of all McCades.

Clifford did not know that the beady snapping eyes of Arnold Lanier melted to a tragic lustrousness as they followed him out of sight. He did not know that the blue-fox thief had sent him away to save his life.

LANIER watched the youth vanish down the tortuous white trail that dropped among alders and masses of wind-bared black granite. Then, with a grim smile on his dark face, this half-savage bird of prey stepped back inside the sod-walled shack and barred the heavy slab door. He finished his breakfast of bread and reindeer meat and black coffee. He loaded his short stubby pipe and smoked until eight parka-clad men on sledges came within rifle range. Then he laid aside the hot black pipe and picked up his high-powered rifle. The familiar heft of the gun was pleasant. Poking the gleaming blue barrel through a small hole beside the door, he squinted along the polished sights.

He cuddled his black-stubbled cheek to the cold stock of the gun and trained his eyes on the sights. His grimy forefinger pressed against the trigger. Through the gray puff of powder-smoke lifting above the sod wall of his cabin, he saw a man pitch from his sledge. He snarled to himself as the other seven leaped aside and sought shelter behind the snow-cowled rocks, leaving the dead man where he lay on the frozen snow, face upturned to the steely Alaskan sky.

The fight was on. Loading, firing, cursing his enemies, Arnold Lanier fought. A bullet smashing through the shake wall of the cabin ripped open his cheek, taking away part of one ear. Another bullet careened across the shack and buried itself in his thick thigh. Lanier hastily wrapped his wounds in filthy rags and drank heavily from his jug of *nootka*. He dropped another man.

After a time the firing died out. Then across the space between the cabin and a nearby wickiup, something moved. It was a sledge, loaded with short alder logs lashed crosswise and topped with flaming brush. It moved mysteriously, pushed forward by two men on their knees, in the rear. The burning load served as a barricade as they pushed it inexorably forward, never ceasing when Lanier's bullets sent showers of splinters and sparks slashing down upon them.

THE sledge gathered speed. Lanier shot with futile fury. The flaming load thudded against the black shakes of the wall. The blaze licked upward. Screened by smoke and fire, the sourdoughs broke from their barricade and raced for shelter. Lanier plugged one of them. The remaining five now lay off behind the wickiup, their loaded rifles outthrust before them, their eyes grim, deadly. They watched the flames lick up the wall of Lanier's shack and build a pillar of billowing red on the roof.

Lanier's stronghold became a furnace. Smoke filled his eyes and lungs. Yellow flames licked at his clothing. The seering torture of the heat drove him insane, senseless. He flung open the door and leaped out onto the steaming snow. His huge frame jerked spasmodically with the impact of the posse's lead. He dropped in a heap, riddled with bullets. And even after he lay quiet, the fox-ranchers reloaded and again emptied their guns in the dead body.

II

WHEN Clifford Lanier returned in the early dusk, he found the cabin in smoking ruins, the four sod walls still hot from the blaze. The bullet-riddled body of Arnold Lanier hung from the limb of a large alder, down the slope. Of the eight men who had come and gone, no trace

remained save crimson smears on the snow and many empty brass cartridges.

Clifford gazed at the gruesome thing that had been his father; he was shocked, filled with horror and fury. Now he understood the significance of this desperate battle; and he realized why his father had insisted on his driving to Three-Mile Larsen's. Here in the bleak wilderness of the peaks had flamed to deadly finality the feud rifles of the McCades against a lone outlawed Lanier.

"They got him," murmured Clifford, bitterly. "Got him for shootin' their pet kid, Harry, in the back. Got him for a killin' done by one of their own rotten brood. An' for that there'll be a settlement."

CLIFFORD LANIER cut down the bullet-torn body and buried it under a pile of rocks. A hot, bitter tear trembled in the corner of each of his smoldering pain-darkened eyes.

The boy knew the story of the conflict between his own people and the McCades. He knew about Circle and the wrestings of one of the greatest mines ever found in the history of Alaska from the hands of his father by the hard and cunning McCades, a family of lawyers, saloonkeepers, traders and blue-fox farmers. It was a story already written in gold and gun-smoke and crimson blood; a story in which moved figures that would become historic. Strong-handed, the McCades had prospered; tempestuous, impulsive, careless, the Laniers had been reduced to desperate outlaws of which he and his father were the last.

Now only he was left.

Nothing remained. Nothing save the long-barreled six-shooter with nine notches on its black-handled butt. There it lay in the snow where Arnold Lanier had been shot to death. The McCade men had overlooked it in their bloody zeal to hang the dead body high on the alder limb.

Clifford picked up the six-shooter and examined it. Every chamber was empty. Dry blood stained its barrel and darkened the cedar handle. He shoved the grisly weapon into his waistband.

His face looked a little white under its wind-darkened bronze, but his mouth was straight-lipped, his black eyes smoldering as he stood there by the burned cabin, tall and slender and straight in the wintry Alaskan gloom.

This old notched single-action gun was all that was left to him of his father, of his people. Even his precious books were gone, and in one of them had been a faded photograph of his mother. Burned by the McCade men. Only one thing remained besides his gun.

Under the ashes of the ruins, buried in a hole, was a rawhide sack full of gold nuggets and coarse dust. Clifford himself had buried it there after Arnold Lanier and three other outlaws had divided the loot they had seized from a Russian seal-poaching crew out on the edge of the ice-field.

Clifford had heard his father's companions drunkenly boast of murdering the poachers on a coastal trail and seizing the gold, which the contraband runners had received from still other criminals in exchange for fur-seal pelts.

A BAD lot, by all civilized standards, those three. One was a thick-set, red-cheeked man with curly black hair, a jolly rollicking fellow, full of coarse humor, but with evil in his black eyes. They called him Roaring Jack.

The second man had impressed Clifford as the most dangerous. But something in him appealed strongly to young Lanier. Duke Stores was a tall, silent American, whose garb and speech were those of a gentleman who had turned his back on his own world, and now trailed with the Bering wolves that raided the fur-raisers of the Alaskan Peninsula on both coasts, stealing pelts and gold.

Though he drank twice as much as any of the rest, he did not show the effects of liquor except that he became more stern and morose and held himself coldly aloof from his coarser-grained companions. His eyes became more tragic, more broodingly bitter than ever.

But if Duke Stores had intrigued his fancy, no less strongly had the third man invited the youth's distrust. This outlaw was the most extraordinary of the group, for he was the renegade, Black Luke McCade, who had been kicked out by his own people and gone over to the side of their enemies.

Utterly bad, this McCade, a gaunt, thin-faced youth whose lips continually dribbled talk of murder and thievery, and who was possessed of a superstitious belief that he would not be killed as long as his wandering twin brother, Arthur, remained alive. A Tlingit medicine woman had so forecast, and the idea gripped Black Luke with startling force; it gave him boldness in crime that amazed other outlaws and infuriated the suffering blue-fox men of the peninsula. So far, the prophecy was fulfilled, for though bullets had creased Luke's skull, he seemed to bear a charmed life.

SAVAGE, cunning, and entirely evil was Black Luke McCade. Adroitly he had schemed to fasten on Arnold Lanier the guilt of shooting Harry McCade in the back But deadly enmity had arisen as a consequence among the outlaws. Black Luke had vanished from the haunts of Arnold Lanier, who had sworn to make him confess the truth or kill him. But now Lanier was dead.

"And I'm left," murmured Clifford. "I'm going to make Black Luke McCade admit that killing before I'm through. I'm going to drag him on his hands and knees in front of his blood kin and make him tell the truth. Blast him and all McCades!"

The words burst from his trembling lips in a bitter cry that rang over the blood-stained snow. His wolf-dogs raised their short triangular ears and gazed at him in silent sympathy; then lifting their gray muzzles to the bleak whiteness of the fading day, they gave way to sad howlings that echoed among the precipices of that vast Alaskan wilderness.

After he had placed the last boulder on the pile that covered his father's distorted body, Clifford went to the wickiup which was still standing, found a pick there, and proceeded to dig in the hot ashes of the cabin.

When he emerged from the smoking sod walls, he was dragging the sealskin poke with its heavy burden of gold. The hot coals had burned his mukluks. His garments were blackened. Beads of sweat stood out on his grimy face. He loaded the poke onto his sledge.

It was dark, and the bitter winds were moaning up the bleak slopes when Clifford Lanier mushed away, never to return. In his heart was pain, bitterness and hatred. Yet as he drove swiftly in the cold night, his temper became mingled with a certain exultation; he forgot that he was frozen and weary. His eyes saw the beauty of the Alaskan night; the slopes revealed dimly under the sparkling stars. His steel sledge-runners whined on the hard white trail. A reckless smile played about his mouth.

Mushing onward, he dug cartridges from his shaggy jacket and reloaded the six-shooter with its nine notches and its blood-stained butt.

Clifford Lanier's purpose was set and he meant to achieve it. But when he had fulfilled his mission of vengeance destiny would choose which trail the youth would take—the farther trail of civilization that led to gentility and ease, or the nearer, rougher, more twisted trail of the Alaskan Territory, with gold regions now flushed in the whirl of excitement and raw gold and gunpowder; where life flowed swiftly and redly against a background of ragged snow-clad peaks and placer nuggets.

Wrapped in his thoughts, Clifford drove on steadily, heading downward. Suddenly he was startled by a harsh voice calling out from the cold dark shadows along the trail.

"Hands up!"

III

WHIRLWIND thoughts swept the boy's brain in the fraction of a moment. Was the money he carried to be stolen, his dogs taken from him; his life snuffed out like a seal-oil drip? Was this to be the end of his mission?

Fear like an icy chill gripped Clifford Lanier. Unable to move or cry out, he sat still on his sledge. Two figures ahead had halted his dogs. Their forms bulked against the sky above the whiteness of the snow.

"Hands up!" ripped the challenge of the two men. And white-lipped with the fear of his first adventure, Cliff Lanier jerked out his six-shooter and turned it upon the two. Crimson splashes of fire burst at him across the snow. He answered, jerking the trigger of the cedar-handled gun that had been his father's.

Dumbly, as in some swift nightmare, he saw a man go down, saw the second parka-clad figure crumple in a heap, a ghostly face with dark beard, horribly distorted, a black hole between the staring eyes.

His huskies, snarling with alarm, mushed swiftly on. Though dogs and youth had traveled forty miles, none of them felt weariness now. A mile of trail was covered before Clifford became fully aware that he had been hit in the thigh by a bullet. A flesh wound, but painful when the numbing shock of the slug had cleared away. He bound it up as best he could with strips from his shirt. His nerves tingled warmly now despite the cold. He was full of the thrill of his first real fight.

He felt like a man who has taken a plunge in cold water, then rubbed himself to a warm glow. A sense of victory brought a smile to his mouth. He was a man. He had fought against double odds and won. He had been marked by a bullet meant to take his life. He had tasted danger and found it palatable. The pain of his wound but served to color his hour of glory. He drove on boldly, his right hand on the blood-stained forty-four.

But when he had gone on for almost an hour, the pain in his thigh made him sick and faint. He began watching for shelter where he might stop and give the wound better attention.

Ahead showed a pin-point of light. A few minutes' travel brought him into the red glow of a fire burning before a wickiup of alder boughs. About the fire sat several men in furs and mackinaws and mushers. All of them were heavily armed with belted guns. Their faces were unshaven, shaggy-bearded; their eyes hard and menacing. They gazed suspiciously at the newcomer.

"I saw your fire," announced Clifford. Outlaws, all of them, he judged. He did not recognize anyone and knew they were not Duke Stores' men.

One short, shaggy man arose. His broad, flattish face bore a scowl as he glared at the intruder from within a mat of reddish whiskers.

"You seen our fire?" he snarled. "How th' hell can that be? We had lookouts on th' trail—say, which way did you come from?"

Clifford jerked a thumb back over his shoulder.

"That way."

The short man cursed.

"Didn't nobody stop you?"

"No," said Clifford, measuring his words. "Nobody stopped me. I mushed right along."

"And I guess," sneered the stocky red-whiskered outlaw, "that some alder branch stickin' out on the trail scratched you in the leg, eh?"

Clifford shook his head. He was feeling oddly weak and dizzy. He gripped the battens of the sledge to steady himself.

"No. I didn't get scratched. I got shot."

"Comin' along th' trail?"

"Yes."

"Thought you said nobody stopped you."

"They didn't. I kept on comin'."

The outlaw glared angrily, his flattish face menacing in the firelight. "Smart young wolf, ain't you? What you want to come into this camp for, anyhow?"

"I thought I might be asked to stay a while," said Clifford wearily. "I—I didn't know what kind of a camp this was. I'll be headin' on—"

Lanier's speech stopped short, as if cut off. His whole body tensed, and his hand dropped toward his gun, only to stop instantly. He seemed to freeze fast to his sledge as he stared across the snow into the black muzzle of a .45.

THE menacing weapon was in the long-fingered hand of a man who had suddenly stepped forth from the alders. A tallish, thin young man, weaving-bodied, long-armed. His narrow face had a certain fineness of feature that was in contrast to the savage sneer of his lips, the treacherous cunning of his stabbing eyes. Too late, Clifford Lanier realized that he had mushed straight into the camp of Black Luke McCade.

"Well—if it isn't the whelp of Arnold, the Wolf," mocked Luke. "How does it happen the blue-fox men didn't string you up today beside your fox-stealing father? Or did you stick your tail between your legs and run for it, eh, Clifford?"

Lanier's eyes flamed. But he made no move toward the butt of the notched gun in his holster, for he saw the thin finger

of Black Luke McCade tense on the trigger of his .45. The renegade was taunting him, trying to get him to make a foolish move that he might have an excuse before his own men for shooting him down in cold blood.

"Not much use of you throwing out insults about fur thieves, Luke," retorted Clifford grimly. "I expect that what you don't know about sniping blues wouldn't be much help to any fox-rustler. And I was away down the trail today—when the fox men came. You fixed it all in fine shape, didn't you, Luke?" he ended bitterly.

"Fixed what?" savagely snarled Black Luke, eyeing the youth.

"Hell, you know what I mean. Shot your own cousin in the back, and lured my father to the body at just the right time for your own McCades to get him. And unless you shoot me to death right here, the way you're itching to do, you'll take your pay for that deal, Luke?"

"I see," sneered Luke McCade, his thin lips drawing into an insulting smile. "You figure to blow me out of the world first chance, eh? Poor start you've made, Lanier."

"I haven't started at all," returned Clifford. "And I don't figure to lie behind an alder and shoot you through the back. I'm going to bring you in front of your own people and make you tell the truth about the killing of Harry McCade."

"Oh, you will! Well, it won't work out that way, Lanier. Not a Chinaman's chance—" Sudden rage broke through the evil, smiling mask of the man.

"TO hell with all you people!" he ripped out. "To hell with my own family. I'm out for Luke McCade and the men who trail with me from now on. Nobody else! I and my twin brother Art are the disgrace of our family, and I know it, the dirty skeletons of their closet. Because we're the sons of a saloonkeeper McCade and a Russian-breed woman. They raised us in Indian town; kept us in the backyard with the dogs. What else would we be but mongrel wolves born in the shadows to live in the darkness? What do I care if a bullet or a rope gets me in the end? Before I'm done, I'll have given more than I get, and I'll take my pay in blood and gold. And now I'm playing you for a sucker, Clifford Lanier."

Clifford, desperate, had again started for his gun. But he had no earthly chance, for Black Luke's gun was still covering him; the killer's eyes alert. Lanier paused again, his gun half drawn. Sheer instant death was leering at him from the muzzle of McCade's six-shooter. No use to make a move now. Maybe later. . . .

"You fool," sneered Luke, "you move to gun me, and you're a goner. Haven't you heard me tell," a maniacal flame flashed into Black Luke's eyes, "that no man can get me while my twin brother's alive! I'm partly Indian; I go with the Tlingit belief. First born—last to die. I've felt lead fan my face but it's never touched me. It won't until Art gets his first."

At a word from Black Luke, the outlaws disarmed Clifford Lanier and seized his pokes of gold. But then, somewhat to their surprise, Black Luke ordered them to dress the prisoner's wound. With rough fingers they cleaned and bound his injury, leaving him fainting from the pain of their rude surgery. That finished, they lashed his ankles with harness thongs and rolled him into a wickiup. Clifford Lanier slept fitfully through the night.

As day broke with the northwesterly wind whining over the rocky wastes above the outlaws' camp and sending flurries of snow sifting down over the wickiups, one of the outlaws mushed in and called to Black Luke McCade.

"Th' Seldovia mail-sledge is on th' Devil's Desk. Be on th' down trail in Eagle Pass in an hour. Looks like Chilkoot Joe's got a passenger with him though."

"Passenger or no passenger, we stop him at the foot of Eagle Pass," came the voice of Black Luke. "He'll have minted gold for the Bristol Bay fur-buyers. Let's get mushing. We'll take our visitor along to use him where he'll do the most good."

IV

MEANWHILE, old Chilkoot Joe Pelly swung his team of huskies down the crooked winding trail, descending from the white ranges he had just crossed. On his sledge he had two bags

of gold for the Bering Sea buyers of wild trapped fur, and with him rode a girl, Marigold McCade.

"Marigold, you've made this trip acrost th' ranges quite some few times, by now, eh?" remarked old Chilkoot Joe, his wind-seared eyes smiling at the fur-clad loveliness of his young passenger. "Seems like you'd oughta know th' trail near as well as me."

The young girl raised her oval face and returned old Chilkoot Joe's smile. Slim, hardly seventeen, Marigold's flower-like beauty entranced the old sourdough who was solicitous of her every need on the trail.

"Yes, Joe, this is the seventh trip across with you. I'll never forget the first one; I was terrified when the wind hit us up on the glacier. You remember?"

"Sure, I remember. But you was only ten years old that time," protested Chilkoot Joe. "John McCade sure didn't want to send you out to open water. Your mother didn't neither, for she'd been snowed in herself once up on th' ranges. But they knowed you had to get schoolin'. So they put you on my sledge an' said—"

"Never mind what they said, Joe," said Marigold, with a little laugh. She had heard that story before.

"They said," persisted old Chilkoot Joe, "to take keer o' you like you was worth a million times more'n th' biggest shipment of dust an' nuggets I ever took acrost th' mountains. Godfrey, I was glad to take you, but I was that nervous I didn't hardly sleep o' nights, fearin' somethin' 'ud happen. If it had, John McCade would of peeled off my hide in strips an' hung it on a cliff."

"Why, he wouldn't do anything of the sort!" cried Marigold, indignantly. "Every one knows, Chilkoot Joe Pelly, that you're the most famous sledge-driver in the Territory, and that you've even got a town named after you over on the Dawson trail. Any time you couldn't make a safe drive across these old mountains, it would be too bad. And my father would never skin anybody into strips!"

Chilkoot Joe chuckled. His attention was relaxed, for his leading husky was a good animal and could be depended on to take care of the outfit every moment he was in harness. But the wolfdog suddenly swerved from the trail, growing hoarsely.

"Hey you there, Wolf-Face!" exclaimed Chilkoot Joe, starting up and gazing ahead through the flurrying snow. "What in hangnation's struck you so sudden—"

"Up, there, you Joe!" rang out the voice of Black Luke McCade through the white pall above the scrubby alders that fringed the trail. "You're covered on both sides. Don't make any fool play!"

"Great godfrey!" groaned Chilkoot Joe.

"Shut up," snarled Luke, advancing warily. "Hands a little higher, Chilkoot. I know what you can do, all right. And so you're the passenger, are you, Marigold? If you've got a gun, keep it in a safe place."

"I haven't got one," snapped Marigold, gazing white-faced at the savage-featured Luke. "But if I did, I'd have used it already."

"And got shot for your trouble," sneered Luke, as he stepped up to Chilkoot Joe and took away his six-shooter. "Cliff Lanier is sittin' up there on his sledge above those alders with a rifle across his knees. If you'll take the trouble to look you'll see him there."

He pointed with his thumb.

CHILKOOT JOE and the girl both looked and saw the slim young figure of Lanier on a sledge above them on the white rugged slope. They saw the rifle in his lap and they could not know that he was lashed fast to his sledge, that the rifle was empty. And the prisoner was too far away to hear what Black Luke was saying.

"Lanier?" growled Chilkoot Joe. "That don't look like Wolf Lanier to me."

"It ain't. It's his son. He's takin' his old man's place, since the fox-men shot an' hanged Arnold. Step further from your sledge while I cut loose that mail-pouch. Sit quiet there, Marigold."

"Who—who are you?" asked the girl. "You know my name. I—I seem to remember seeing you before. A long time ago."

Black Luke did not answer. He gazed intently at the beauty of the girl for an instant, then knelt and with an opened clasp-knife slashed at the pouch on the sledge. "Heavy, all right," he muttered.

With a quick deft movement, Marigold McCade snatched at the butt of the six-shooter in the outlaw's holster. She had almost withdrawn it, when from somewhere among the alders a gun cracked. The six-shooter was knocked spinning from the hand of the terrified girl, to land almost at Chilkoot Joe's feet.

The sledge-driver stopped and grabbed at it. As he did so, Black Luke pulled out his left gun, leveled it at Chilkoot Joe and fired two crashing shots that hurled the old sourdough into a sprawling huddle on the snow.

"Take this pouch," McCade called out harshly to one of his men. "Come on, Marigold, you're going with us."

"Going with you——you!" echoed Marigold, her lovely face whitening with terror. She stepped back from the outlaw swiftly, hands upraising before her.

"Just that," retorted Luke, with a diabolical smile that left the girl sick and faint. "You don't seem to like me much, do you, Marigold? I remember one time I saw you in Kalvik with John McCade. 'A Siwash-Russian cur,' your father called me, and you shuddered and looked the other way."

"I remember—now," gasped the girl, her eyes widening with stark panic. "You are—you are Black Luke!"

"Yes, Marigold, I'm Luke—a cousin of yours. We're relations, Marigold. The Aleut-Russian cur is a cousin of yours. Half cousin anyway. You'll be—all right with me." The long-faced dark outlaw stood smiling at her, eagerly devouring the loveliness of her terror-stricken face, a savage ferocity glinting in his eyes.

With a choking cry, she turned as if to run, but almost before she had started Black Luke seized her by the wrist and whirled her around roughly.

"Come on now, Marigold!" he said, mockingly, thrusting his smiling long face close to hers. "This way. Over onto my sledge—cousin!"

CLIFFORD LANIER, tightly lashed to the battens of the sledge on which he sat, watched Black Luke drag the struggling girl to another sledge and secure her there. The short red-whiskered bandit lurked about the girl, ogling her.

"Quit that, Brower!" rasped Luke McCade, observing the man's actions. "Get on ahead and trail out the dogs."

He ceased fingering fresh shells into his gun, his face hardening.

With a sidewise glare from his triangular eyes and a half hidden snarl, the other obeyed.

As the outlaws began straightening out their huskies, Lanier gazed at the form of Chilkoot Joe, prostrate there on the trail. He saw a slight movement of the sourdough's limbs. Black Luke also espied that movement and raising his gun, made as if to hurl another shot at the wounded man.

A sobbing cry broke from the lips of Marigold McCade. "Don't, don't, you—you killer, you—" she cried out, wildly, her face distorted with horror and fear. "If you have a single drop of human blood in you, Luke McCade, stop!"

But Luke had already lowered his gun. He was grinning at the pleading girl.

"No—I won't kill him," he answered, exultantly. "I'll let him get away. I'll let him mush down to Kalvik, and tell all about what happened here. It'll taste sweet in the mouth of the McCades, Marigold. They'll wear themselves out, hunting for you in the ranges. They'll never find you. And while they're trying to, we'll drop on their fox-lays. The McCades will live to curse the day I was spawned and marked for a mongrel dog!" His voice raised to a tragic, savage cry.

"Mush, you men!" he shouted to the outlaws. "Mush—west to Brunn's Gap for tonight. From there we go to Grisly Canyon. Mush out."

As the outlaws drove away, Clifford saw Chilkoot Joe Pelly creeping slowly toward his sledge a dozen yards from him. Just before the alders and granite obscured the wounded man from Lanier's view, he saw him engaged in an agonizing struggle to get onto the vehicle, while his dogs stood with lolling tongues gazing back at him.

FOR several hours Luke McCade and his followers drove westward with their prisoner, traveling against swirling gusts of wind-driven snow until they came to a sod-walled shack sheltered from the fury of the Bering gales by a broken mass of black scarred rock. Here they halted and unharnessed their dogs.

A short while later a devilish scene, yet one that was destined to be common enough during that lawless period in the region, was revealed in the rude cabin in which the McCade gang were camped for the night.

On a rough bunk made of split boards spiked to the wall and covered with wolf-skins, crouched Marigold McCade, still a prisoner bound with dog-harness thongs. Across the room in a corner lay Clifford Lanier, even more securely lashed.

Around a crude table in the middle of the place lurched and squatted six shaggy half-drunken men. A sheet-iron stove roared red-hot at their backs, hurling out heat; the air was heavy and stifling with the sodden odorous fumes of bad whiskey. A jug was on the table; the men drank noisily from grimy tin cups. A deck of greasy cards was before them, and they had been playing for some time. Frequently they leered with the ferocity of beasts at the terrified girl.

"Little cousin, she is," mumbled Luke McCade, drunkenly. "Sweet li'l' cousin of Luke's an' Art's. Wish Art was here to see her. She ain't never met neither of her cousins to speak to, before; didn't know they were McCades, I guess. Siwash-Russian curs, these cousins of hers. McCades just th' same, Marigold."

The girl made no move to indicate that she heard; she was rigid, wild-eyed, almost out of her mind by now with fear. Clifford Lanier, watching, listening, was no less agonized, insane with despair and loathing.

"Yes," went on Luke. "S'pose you're hopin' your father, John McCade, and the rest will kill me for this, eh? Maybe they will, an' maybe they won't. But they got to kill my brother Art first. That's what the Tlingit medicine woman said who tended my mother. I know I'm born to meet a bullet and before I go I expect to have a good bit of fun. That's why you're here, Marigold."

Clifford Lanier struggled terrifically at the caribou thongs on his wrists. But they were secure and tight. He continued to strain and writhe so desperately that he chafed his wrists raw, and the blood streaming over his thongs made them wet and shrank them tighter than ever.

"We've all took a chance on our necks in this, Luke," spoke up the harsh voice of Red Brower. "If you're going to have this girl, like you say, what do we get for the chance we've took?"

"What do you get?" retorted Luke. "What is it to you if I take this girl? I did it, not you. She's mine. One of my blood kin. Oh, yes, she's my little cousin, and now I'm goin' to make love to her."

"We got some rights in this, Luke," insisted Brower, drunkenly. "S'posin' we cut th' cards for this—"

"Suppose, hell!" snarled Luke McCade, suddenly breaking into one of his frightful fits of rage. "Suppose—"

He whipped out his six-shooter and leveling it at the red-whiskered man, jerked trigger. A spurt of flame burst fairly into the distorted face of Red Brower. The shock of the slug hurled him clear out of his chair, the side of his leering face torn off, paralyzed in a hideous expression of lust and terror.

Another outlaw, rising with a wild shout, seized the oil lamp on the table and flung it straight at Luke McCade. It smashed against the shake wall a yard from Clifford Lanier, fell clattering to the floor beside him.

A BLUISH flame leaped up from the wreckage, spreading swiftly. Luke's six-shooter was crashing again. There was a cursing, a pounding of feet in the shadowy illumination of the red-hot stove and the rising flames of the broken lamp.

Recklessly Clifford Lanier struggled toward that oil-fed fire beside him. Writhing around so that his back was toward it, he thrust out his wrists, then gritted his teeth in agony as the tongues of flame seared both the rawhide lashings and his own flesh. But the scorching thongs quickly stretched and he wrenched his arms free. In an instant he had cleared his feet and was staggering up.

Bare-headed, he flung himself into the fighting throng of men. A fist struck him a crashing blow. He struck back, and his knuckles sank into Luke McCade's jaw with a rending, tearing sound. With a screaming curse, Luke wheeled, swiping at Lanier with the barrel of his forty-five. The two men collided, then crashed against the stove. Clifford lashed out again, and sent Luke reeling across the room. With the

desperation of a wounded cougar, Lanier followed after the outlaw, caught him by the shoulder and bore him to the floor.

At that instant, from outside the shack came a sudden howling of wolf-dogs, a sound of harsh voices.

"Clear out!" snarled one of the outlaws. "They're fox-men! Mush! Out the back door!"

Luke McCade fought clear of Lanier's grip and plunged out through a rear door that had been flung wide by the fleeing outlaws. From the outer darkness burst in a flurry of frozen snow and an icy blast of wind. Hardly a second later the front door of the cabin was kicked open and stern-faced parka-clad men rushed in, leveled guns in their hands.

They found Clifford Lanier sitting unsteadily on the floor beside the capsized table, his face battered and bleeding, a whiskey jug gurgling beside him, and a rising pillar of flame licking up the farther wall. The place was full of the mingled fumes of whiskey and burning coal oil. On a bunk lay Marigold McCade in a dead faint.

V

"UP, you coyote!" the leader rasped. "We've got you with the deadwood. Son of Arnold Lanier, eh? Well, in three minutes we'll have you where we put your father yesterday morning. And if that girl's hurt—" The speaker paused, chokingly.

"Ask her about it," said Clifford, still breathing hard, "maybe she'll tell you that I was a prisoner here, too—"

"Oh, you're a prisoner, too, eh?" sneered the fox-man. "Here's likker spilled an' gear smashed, an' cards scattered all over the place, an' you sittin' in th' middle of it all. Too bad her father ain't here to see you swing. But there'll be no waitin'—"

"There's Red Brower lyin' there with his face shot off," put in another rancher. "Another one there, too, looks like he ain't cashed in, but goin' to. Maybe he can tell us what young Lanier was doin' here."

"He—he was here with us," panted the outlaw, turning baleful eyes on Clifford Lanier. "He's th' king pin of th' bunch—"

Hardly had he ceased speaking when he gave a strangled groan and stiffened in death. It was as if those men who traveled with Black Luke McCade or his twin brother, Arthur, unconsciously absorbed their black-hearted treachery, their cruel cunning. So this man, on the threshold of death, paused to fling back words that would help to tighten the rope around Clifford Lanier's throat.

"Godfrey!" snarled a sourdough. "If that don't settle it, what does? Out with him. Damn a country that don't have bigger trees'n this."

THEY dragged Lanier out. He had recovered his breath now. Haughty, white-lipped, he said nothing more. It seemed to be in the cards that he should die as his father had died—for a crime perpetrated by Black Luke McCade. He'd not plead for his life. He would not even again ask them to wait and query Marigold. Ironic fate seemed resolved that the McCades should destroy all Laniers, even him.

Out into the icy wind-swept night the fox-men dragged their prisoner. He had regained his notched gun, and the sourdoughs after jacking it of shells thrust it contemptuously back in his holster. They would hang him with his gun, notches and all.

Stinging gusts of frozen snow borne on the whining Bering wind, pelted his cheeks. And down that wind came a new sound of approaching dog-teams, and then a cold cry rang out,—

"Steady, you men! You're covered. All of you! Stand away from Clifford Lanier!"

Clifford was astonished to recognize the voice of Duke Stores.

Flames were now bursting out of the shack, casting a lurid light over the snow. Marigold had already been wrapped in furs and tenderly placed on a sledge.

In the reddish illumination of the burning cabin the fox-men in white frosted parkas paused around their prisoner. At a nearby alder others halted in the act of lashing a sledge draw-rope into a noose.

Rifle barrels showed menacingly from above the surrounding rocks. There was a snarling of hidden dogs.

"We'll never let him go!" yelled a fox-rancher, savagely. "We—" The crash of a rifle cut short the man's speech. He spun,

threw his arms outward from his sides and lurched into the snow. The other fox-men hesitated.

"They've got us at a disadvantage," growled one of the more cautious ones. "They're hid, and we're here in th' open, with th' firelight back of us. Let the wolf go. We'll get him later, when th' chances are more even."

"That's sense, called out the cold voice from the shadowy darkness of the rocks. "Stand away—and be quick."

"He's a robber and a thief," called out another. "He watched one of his men shoot down the mail-sledge driver in cold blood and leave him to crawl into camp half dead. He looted the mail and kidnaped a girl. Who are you to say he won't hang?"

"This is Duke Stores. Roaring Jack and my men are here. I'm telling you that you're wrong. Lanier is not the man you want. Get away from him."

"We'll give him to you in about twenty minutes, Stores—"

"Mush away!" came the harsh bawl of a roaring voice. "Mush away or we'll drill you all!"

THE wind bore the loud menacing cry upon the hesitating fox-men. The more timorous ones were already retreating, leaving only two or three about Lanier. Reluctantly they also obeyed. Lanier turned and spoke to them.

"Before I'm through, I'll have the man that did this confess the truth. The same man that shot Harry McCade through the back—Black Luke, his cousin. For now, I'll go with Stores."

"We'll settle with you yet," sneered one of the fox-men. "If John McCade was here, he'd never let you get away alive."

The fox-ranchers retreated in the direction of their huskies. Lanier lurched the other way, toward the hidden rifles. He was helped onto a sledge and in a moment was riding swiftly away through the snow-filled night.

"We were near Kalvik when Chilkoot Joe Pelly came in, torn from his gun-wounds," said the tall bitter-eyed Duke Stores. "We heard the story of the hold-up, and we judged Black Luke was playing you off for crow-meat. And we knew about where to look."

"Too bad we didn't get along a little quicker—we'd 'a' settled that black lynx!" rumbled Roaring Jack.

"Luke's always claiming he'll never die before his brother Art," said a voice. "An' Art McCade ain't puttin' himself in th' way of no bullets to speak of."

"Bah, that slick tinhorn'll drop a spare ace out of his sleeve any day and get his, fast an' hot," sneered another. "Who believes that Siwash stuff about th' first twin dyin' last, anyhow?"

"I ain't sayin' what I believe," said the other bandit. "But Black Luke sure seems to squeeze out of more'n one tight fix where a man'd say he was through."

"Forget it," snapped Duke Stores coldly. "Siwash superstition. Black Luke lives by it and it gives him courage. Just a fancy."

"Even so," persisted the other, "I'd hate to stand face to face against Back Luke McCade until his tinhorn brother is dead."

Duke Stores laughed coldly, while Roaring Jack chuckled and urged the huskies onward with a throaty trail cry. Thus they vanished into the Alaskan night.

VI

SEVERAL days later Duke Stores and his men mushed into the roaring gold-mad town of Kalvik. They came boldly and in force, wearing paired guns in tied-down holsters. With them came Clifford Lanier.

Mushing down the single shack-fronted street of the settlement, they left their dogs to be cared for by an Aleut breed and then moved almost in military formation along the board sidewalk. Men greeted them with flat non-committal politeness. Kalvik was strictly a miners' town, and the fur-bandits were fairly safe from molestation here. Yet their reputation made them marked men; every moment of their presence here in the settlement bore menace of suddenly belching guns.

The gold Clifford Lanier had taken from his father's cabin had been carried off by Luke McCade, but Duke Stores had insisted upon lending him a dozen ounces of dust. He now entered a trading-store and purchased a Tlingit-made suit of mooseskin that fitted him as if tailored. To this he added a finely beaded pair of speckled otterskin mukluks, a tasseled sableskin cap and a cartridge belt.

He had at last satisfied his longing for good raiment. And he indeed made a handsome figure. His hair was trimmed, he was steamed in a Russian bath and brushed. The notched gun hung in a soft oiled holster; his belt loops were filled with shells. More than one dark-eyed Russian-breed girl of that rugged frontier settlement looked with favor upon this youth with the handsome reckless face and the jet black hair. A gentleman, that stripling, even though he was in the company of the most notorious outlaw band of the Alaskan Peninsula, and so must be one of them.

Clifford was embarrassed by these sidelong glances. He was not accustomed to girls. Kalvik had many of them. At last, red and uncomfortable, he urged his companions into the shelter of one of the largest saloons and gambling places.

Here a dense throng of miners were congregated and in the thrust and push Lanier became separated from his companions. He gazed at the colorful gathering, at the mackinaw or fur-clad men of the diggings, at the cold-faced gamblers, at the ladies of the night.

Somewhere in the crowd a face leaped out at him. He almost imagined he had seen the sneering-lipped features of Black Luke McCade. As he sought further, a voice spoke to him from across the bar.

"What'll it be, stranger?"

Lanier turned and confronted the red-faced bartender.

"How? Oh, make it something light."

A smile curved the lips of the broad-faced barkeep. He rested two portly forearms on the mahogany and smirked.

"We're all outa milk, sonny."

As he spoke, the bartender winked at a brown-bearded sourdough who was gazing steadily at Lanier.

CLIFFORD went hot, then cold, under the insult of the bartender's grin. He sensed, rather than saw, the amusement of the big brown-bearded man beside him. He had that same quickening pulse-beat, that clammy-handed timidity that he had felt at his first fight with the two men on the trail. For a moment he was helpless.

A lump in his throat seemed to choke him. Then his hand moved toward his hip, moved back so swiftly that the gesture seemed unbroken. The gun with its nine notches on the handle were pointed at a spot between the bartender's eyes.

"Something light," Cliff repeated, his voice sounding oddly harsh in his own ears. "Coffee, I guess."

That nausea of fear was gone. It was as if the feel of the gun banished fear by some odd magic. Cliff's lips smiled crookedly. The bartender looked along the gun-barrel to the eyes behind it. Those eyes were thin, shining slits now. The eyes of a killer.

"Excuse me, stranger," he said in a new voice. "Coffee she is—and I'll have some boiled up real fresh."

Cliff nodded. The gun went back into its tied holster. The youth faced the bearded man.

"Now, mister," he said in a chilly voice, "what'll be your game? Is there something funny—"

He paused abruptly, for he recognized the sourdough. It was the man Black Luke had called Chilkoot Joe, the sledge-driver who had been held up below the Devil's Desk.

"You—you?" gasped Lanier. "I thought you were killed—that day—"

Grizzled Chilkoot Joe shook his head. No menace was in his eyes, but only smiling friendliness. "One of Luke McCade's slugs ripped me across the top of the head an' left me kind of locoed for a while. 'Nother slug nipped me under the thigh—not bad, though I did lose a good lot of blood. But I never looked to see you here."

"I came in with—with some friends," said Lanier, awkwardly.

"Umm! I'd heard Duke Stores was in town. That who you mean?"

"Yes."

"Uh-huh. Well, I ain't sayin' anything about him. Them friends of yours sure come at the right time. Oh, I heard all about it from Marigold. She told us about that fight up there in Luke's trail shack. And she's wantin' to see you, Lanier."

"Wants to see me—"

"Of course. Why not? She—she wants to apologize for th' fox-men actin' the way they done up there. If they'd waited to ask her what happened, they wouldn't of started to—well, anyways, they was too hasty. Even John McCade admits that."

A grim smile formed involuntarily on Lanier's lips. "I appreciate your telling me

this," he said quietly. "But I don't—I wouldn't care to go among any of the blue-fox men."

"But, looky here, they know they made a mistake, an' that's settled," insisted Chilkoot Joe. "If you stay with Duke Stores an' his outfit you'll undo all th' good of th' scrap up in that shack. Men'll come to say it was just one outlaw bunch fightin' another. Now's th' time to step out clean."

"There's no stepping out until I settle with Luke McCade—"

"He's right, Cliff. You're not cut out to trail with us. We separate—and today."

LANIER wheeled and saw Duke Stores standing almost behind him. The tall outlaw, paying no heed to the curious eyes that were focused upon him, spoke again.

"That's why we mushed in here to Kalvik, to get a word on how you stood in that affair. We wouldn't want to drop you among enemies. But this thing has been explained. Now's your chance. If you mush out of Kalvik with us, you'll be called one of us. If you stay here—"

"But—" began Clifford, his heart sinking. He was strongly drawn toward this fine-featured yet tragic-eyed and bitter man. More strongly drawn than he had ever been to any one.

"Good-bye, Cliff," said Duke Stores. He held out his long shapely hand. Involuntarily Lanier took it in a tense grasp. The tumult of the big gambling place lessened almost to the vanishing point. Men stared at that slow handclasp. Then Duke Stores turned and his men moved out with him.

Clifford Lanier stood stock still for an instant, his eyes misty. He felt suddenly alone, among doubtful men; men who would at best regard him with reserve. But not so Chilkoot Joe Pelly. He shoved out a hand the color of old leather. It gripped Clifford's in a steel vise. The blue eyes, almost hidden in the brown beard, shone brightly.

"It's better this way," he said simply.

Clifford felt a lump in his throat, but the affable and garrulous Chilkoot Joe radiated a cheer that disspelled the youth's mood. The old sledge-driver clapped his new companion between the shoulders, felt of the new clothes, removed a shaggy patched beaver cap and tried on Cliff's new one. And after another drink, he led Cliff about the white-clad settlement with an air of pride.

Marigold McCade's story of Lanier's fight in the shack, and the lightning speed of the draw he had just seen had made a tremendous impression on old Chilkoot Joe. He and Cliff ended finally in another thronged gambling house where every table was filled.

"There's some good stiff games in draw poker just started up in here," said Chilkoot Joe. "How much dust you got?"

"Not much," admitted Cliff.

"Well, don't set out over a couple ounces for your first lesson."

As Joe glanced at the youth, he saw that Cliff's face had suddenly paled; his lips had gone tight and cold. He was gazing fixedly at the waxen-featured gambler at the poker table.

VII

IT was the same man that Lanier had seen two hours before in the throng of the first saloon he had entered—the man that looked like a twin brother of Luke McCade. He strikingly resembled Luke, had the same long face, the thin cheeks, and the sneering lips.

"What's the matter, Cliff?" queried Chilkoot Joe. "Sight of Art McCade's hard face scare you sick?"

"Scared?" echoed Clifford, softly. "I saw him before in that other place."

"Yep, he hadn't gone on yet for his trick. He's a temporary man, a no-'count drifter trailin' a one-horse opry show bunch that's in town. Ain't no doubt in my mind he's a slicker. Bein' a twin brother of Black Luke is a lot ag'in him, but still an' all it don't prove much. Just th' same I wouldn't pick him for my dealer."

Clifford Lanier did not answer. He was moving forward toward Art McCade's table. A man went broke and the youth slid into the vacated chair. The gambler looked at the newcomer with lifted eyebrows, then tensed slightly. A gleam of fire, of mutual distrust and dislike, flashed unseen between the two men. Lanier shoved his poke on the table and held the gambler's gaze unflinchingly.

Clifford stayed out of the first two hands. Then the cards came to him to be dealt.

A sheep among wolves of the golden frontier.

The youth's slender hands gathered in the cards, shuffled them with swift deftness, and slid the deck out for the cut. Then the cards went around rapidly. The pot grew with the betting, and at the showdown Clifford Lanier had quadrupled his dust. Then he lost twice but won back five times the amount of his losses with a single hand.

At the end of an hour, Art McCade, tight-lipped and annoyed, sent a mute signal of distress toward a tall elaborately dressed watchful-eyed man over near the bar. This man, the owner of the place, nodded his head in a barely-perceptible motion. It was a signal for the dealer to cheat. At once he brightened considerably. He dealt from a new deck.

There were five men playing. When the betting climbed sky-high, all but Cliff dropped out. He looked at his cards, laid them face down and shoved his entire winnings to the center of the table.

Art McCade looked at him, smiling faintly, and covered the bet.

"I'm betting you're bluffing," he said, in a strained tone. "Cards?"

"I'll play what I have," said Cliff. "But before you draw to your hand, will you oblige me by showing me the three bottom cards in the deck?"

"What do you mean?" Art McCade's smile froze to a thin slit.

"I have a lot of dust in that pot," explained Clifford, with a cold smile. "I can't see what harm is done if you deal off the three bottom cards face up, where all of us can see them. I know it's a queer request, but if this is an honest game, there can be no harm done."

The flashily dressed man over at the bar stiffened tensely. His hand dropped to his gun and then the tight look on his face gave way to a mask-like calm. A hush had fallen across the men at the card table. Somehow it sped swiftly over the barroom and a deathly silence fell. It looked as if the evening's entertainment was to be suddenly brought to a climax by blazing six-shooters.

"On second thought," said Cliff, calmly. "I'll take back the request."

Art McCade relaxed, his lipless mouth twisting in a cold smile. His white-skinned right hand came away from the vest pocket that hid a derringer pistol.

"Instead," went on Clifford, in a clear unemotional voice, "I'll name the three cards on the bottom of the deck. Three aces. Club, spade, and diamond. Fill your hand!"

THE words carrying across the gambling house bore a double meaning. Art McCade could fill his poker hand with the needed cards, or close his fingers over the cold butt of a gun.

Clifford Lanier's right hand slid from view. His fist gripped the black butt of the big six-shooter, the muzzle leaped as if by magic above the table top.

For a long moment the gambler stared into Cliff's eyes.

"So you're a McCade," said Clifford, softly.

The gambler nodded almost imperceptibly.

Lanier echoed it with a movement of his own chin. "I'm glad to meet you this way. My name is Lanier. Son of Arnold Lanier."

Art McCade, distinctly whiter than was natural to him, dropped his gaze. With a hand that trembled, he drew three cards from the top of the deck.

With his left hand, Clifford spread his own cards face upward on the table. A full house, dealt him by the fox-like man across the table.

"That beats me," said Art McCade, reaching for the discard.

"One minute," returned Clifford, still smiling. "I'll bet the pot against the gun in your vest pocket that there are three aces on the bottom of the deck."

But with a sharp gesture, Art McCade raked in the discard and mixed the deck. Clifford took his winnings, some two thousand dollars' worth of dust. Then he pushed back his chair, holstered his gun and arose. He gazed straight down into the dark serpent-like eyes of the twin brother of Black Luke McCade.

"Some day—soon—" breathed the gambler, almost inaudibly.

"Any time's all right with me, Art McCade," murmured Cliff, his voice deadly. "Right now, if you want . . ."

Art McCade made no move, but sat rigid,

pale, sneering, his lips ferocious. But fear held him fast.

LANIER turned away and many men gazed after the stripling youth. Who was this young fellow who could upset the equanimity of hardened Kalvik?

"My godfrey — watch your back, when you walk in th' dark!" breathed Chilkoot Joe Pelly, hardly above a whisper, as he pulled the youth off to a deserted section of the bar. "Where'd you learn cards like that, fellow?"

"My father and his—his friends used to play a lot. Duke Stores showed me several pointers on cards."

"Well—" The old sledge-driver's astonished exclamation died off into silence. Clifford thought he understood, thought Chilkoot Joe regretted his quickly given friendship. Lanier made as if to leave, holding out his hand in a gesture of farewell.

"I won't be bothering you any longer, Joe. I'll be going.

"Hold on there. Wait a minute, young rooster. Proud ain't you? You don't give Chilkoot Joe Pelly th' slip. Not by a jugful. Don't do no explainin'. Because your dad was ornery, that's no reason you got to make snake tracks when you travel. I'm mushin' south to open water with a shipment of golddust and nuggets. Need a guard with me. I'd be proud to fetch you along."

Clifford gazed with wistful eyes at old Chilkoot Joe. Something in his boy's heart longed for that rugged life of the trail. That life of hardship, lurking danger, and unceasing rigors. Days of cold sunlight, screaming Bering winds and singing snow. Nights when the stars shone icily over the ranges. Other nights when Arctic gales sobbed across those white-mantled desolate ramparts, enveloping them with swirling masses of frozen snow in which for a man to be lost meant death.

"I'd like to go—but I've got a trail of my own to travel. You've spoke of the fox-men — and that they've made a mistake. But I can see by the way you tell it that the fox-men only half believe it was an error. The McCades and the Laniers are enemies. Been enemies for years. They shot and hanged my father for a sneaking killer when their own renegade kinsman did the job. I've got something to settle with the McCades. Their admitting they were wrong that night up under the Devil's Desk doesn't square things by a long shot."

Chilkoot Joe raised his eyes, then silently studied this slim, proud youth. Slowly he shook his grizzled head.

"Son, if you're goin' to nurse hate against all the McCades of this region, you got a lot of nursin' to do. The McCade family is numerous. Seems like the first one that come up here and made a strike at Circle sent back for all his people. They number some dozen, an' they're mostly all men I wouldn't claim for no friends of mine, exceptin' John. But I wouldn't want to go fightin' 'em all, neither."

"I hate them all!" exclaimed Clifford Lanier, bitterly. "You talk about Circle. That was a Lanier strike; but the McCades got it. They're the men who play the stacked decks to win, from the biggest fox-rancher down to that tinhorn crook sulking over there. But the one I want is Black Luke. I'm going to mush on his trail."

Chilkoot Joe Pelly's big, hard hand rested gently on the youth's shoulder.

"I ain't sayin' maybe you don't owe the McCades a good bit, son," he said. "But if your hunt is for Black Luke McCade, there sure ain't no use your stayin' here. He'd never show his face in Kalvik. Likely as not, he'll drift south toward the Cold Bay country—maybe to join the Johnson bunch.

"Cliff, you better come with me on this trip, anyhow. You'll get nothin' but coarse grub and some days not that. There'll be lots of snow an' storms. There'll be nights guardin' that gold on the way out, and minted money on the way back. There'll be some outlaws to fight. Maybe you'll get shot up. But you'll see some of the rawest region in this big country, and, like I said, you're as liable as not to cross the sign of Black Luke McCade down that way. Want to come?"

A lump choked Lanier's speech. His eyes were moist as he again gripped the steel-muscled hand of Chilkoot Joe.

"Now, then," chuckled Pelly, in a tone of relief, "long as that's settled, s'pose you an' me go over here to this North

Star Opry House an' see th' show that's in town. Me, I ain't seen one in fifteen years an' this one is leavin' for open water before th' snow softens on th' trails."

VIII

AFTER stopping at a restaurant run by a bland Chinaman for a substantial meal that cost them twenty dollars' worth of gold apiece. Clifford and Chilkoot Joe entered the rude snow-cowled structure, once a Russian church, that served as a show house for Kalvik.

They spent fifty dollars in dust and obtained a box close to the stage. Two performers, a man and a woman, in purple tights and tinsel spangles began balancing on a slack wire. The man was a little drunk, and the glare of the calcium lights revealed the weariness under the woman's paint and powder. But Clifford Lanier sat there enthralled.

Half an hour later, after a black-faced comedian's jokes had convulsed Chilkoot Joe and left him stricken with hiccoughs, the curtain was rung down.

The manager, a villainous-looking man and dressed in a loud checkered suit, stepped from the wings and raised a gloved hand.

"Anita Starling, ladies and gentlemen," he called in a harsh raucous voice. "Anita Starling, darling of the dance, in 'The Miner's Dream.'"

The curtain rose to the accompaniment of two violins that murmured sweetly in the swift hush of the audience. The stage was darkened. In the rear were drops realistically resembling the walls of a gulch. A real campfire burned clearly near it, its illumination subdued by heaps of brush. A man in miner's garb relaxed close by it as if in sleep.

A girl drifted across the shadowy stage, like a bit of blown thistledown. She came on, silken legs twinkling, brief skirts billowing. A mass of thick golden curls tossed about an elfin face.

CLIFFORD LANIER leaned across the rude rail of the box, breathless at the fairy-like girl whose delicate grace and elusive beauty drew him with magnetic attraction. She must have seen him and read the frank adoration written on his face, for she sent him a fleeting smile. Or perhaps she was only amused at the gaping jaw of Chilkoot Joe, who sat beside the youth, staring his astonishment.

She moved as if she were indeed some wraith of that lonely gulch. Back and forth before the campfire she floated enticingly.

Then it happened. The frail material of her skirt flirted too close to the brightly burning fire. The chiffon stuff in which the girl was clad burst into swift blaze. The licking crackling flames enveloped the suddenly stiffening body. The girl's face, white as death, with two crimson rough spots, twisted in terror. The audience was paralyzed with horror.

Clifford cleared the box railing, running even as his feet struck the boards of the stage. His mackinaw was off, and in the next second its heavy cloth smothered the fire. He crushed the smaller flames with his hands, without feeling the sting of his burned palms. Then he was holding her in his arms. Her eyes, stark with fright, were looking into his tense face. The pungent odor of burnt cloth stung his nostrils. He carried her into the wings, where painted troupers rendered blundering aid.

A heavy woman holding a blue cape trimmed with white fox-fur rushed forward.

"My God! My God! Lucy, Honey! Tell me you ain't dyin'!"

"Bring some salve. Lard'll do."

But the little dancer slipped from Cliff's trembling arms and stood there, laughing a bit hysterically. She held Cliff's mackinaw in her hand. Her ballet dress was a charred ruin, but the girl was unhurt.

"Don't call any doctor," she said. "I'm —I'm all right. Mother, stop shrieking and give me a wrap."

She was shaking, her breath coming in quick little sobs. A butterfly with singed wings. Then with an impulsive movement her arms went about Cliff's shoulders and, standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him on the mouth.

Clifford went hot as fire, cold as if stricken by a chill. The red stuff from the girl's mouth clung to his. Her wide blue eyes, heavily fringed and shining with unshed tears, were thanking him. He did not remember until a long time afterward

that the butterfly's beauty was a little taudry and garish, that her mother smelled strongly of whiskey. He barely knew that the older woman was blubbering moistly as she wrapped the singed butterfly in the cape trimmed with white fur.

The nimble-witted manager was out on the stage making a speech. And Anita Starling was not to be cheated out of her hour of applause. She dragged Clifford Lanier out into the glare of the footlights.

The crowd cheered with tumultuous uproar. The youth gazed out over that throng. Half blinded as he was by the brilliant calciums, his gaze was drawn swiftly to one face in that audience that riveted his attention. A pale, thin, sneering face, in which two eyes glittered with portent of murder.

EVEN as their glances crossed, Clifford Lanier recognized Art McCade. Already the man's hand had leaped from inside his coat with a pistol.

Clifford Lanier's right hand dropped to the heavy single-action gun in his tied-down holster. It came up with smooth unhesitating swiftness, his thumb drawing the toothed hammer back as he leveled the weapon.

The two guns crashed out in a quick, deafening, double report. The gambler's derringer at the rear of the audience, while Lanier's six-shooter blazed straight from the stage. There was a helter-skelter scrambling, a thudding of bodies striking the floor, of chairs being overturned.

Again the gambler's pistol cracked, but the bullet went wild, tearing up through the roof. With a shrill woman-like scream, he pitched across an emptied chair and crashed with it to the floor. His gun clattered down noisily after him. From the wings came cries of terror. But already the gun battle was ended and Lanier was reholstering his smoking weapon.

Chilkoot Joe, who had imbibed so freely before coming to see the show that he had hardly been able to sit up straight, now stood upright in the rude box, suddenly sober enough, his hand on his own six-shooter, watching.

"I knowed that coyote would show his hand sooner or later, Cliff," he called out to Lanier in the hush that fell, as smoke drifted upward in stray wisps and its pungent odor struck sharply through the place. "You wrecked him an' he was out to collect damages."

The sheriff of Kalvik came up. Sourdoughs crowded about, producing a scene of animated confusion.

"Who done it?" demanded the officer.

"I did," said Lanier, coldly. "He shot at me with that double-barreled pistol. I had to stop him."

"It's a clear case of self-defense," declared Chilkoot Joe. "Art McCade was out to kill him."

There arose a general assent from the crowd of sourdoughs who thronged about the collapsed form of the gambler.

"All right," nodded the sheriff. "As long as everybody says this killin' was in self-defense, there's no need to arrest anybody. Couple men give me a hand to take this fellow over to th' commissioner's till he's planted."

"I gave McCade a chance to go for his gun when we ended the game," said Clifford, bitterly. "Why didn't he settle it then?"

"Didn't have th' nerve, I guess," said Chilkoot Joe. "Probably there's somethin' more to it than we know. Anyhow, we've had enough hell-raisin' for one night, an' we got work to do in th' morning. Time to look for sleep."

IX

THE next day, despite Clifford's protests, Chilkoot Joe took him to the fox-ranch of John McCade. The McCade place was a relay station on the thousand-mile trail from Nome to Seldovia. It was here that the wearied drivers would pull in from the last station to the north with mail and gold. From here Chilkoot Joe and his new assistant would start south on the hardest trek of the journey to open water, over south of the ranges.

John McCade was away with an outbound shipment of blue-fox fur when Chilkoot Joe and Clifford mushed in. They were met by Marigold's mother. With graying hair, yet fresh and attractive of feature, Mrs. McCade was a true frontier woman, resolute and competent, and with a lovable quality that radiated from her.

"Clifford Lanier, I'm glad to know you," she exclaimed, seizing both his

hands. "And I'm sorry that there was a misunderstanding. We've felt badly over it—Marigold and I. We've been wanting to tell you. John's having to stay with the sledges, trying to get them over the Devil's Desk. The wind has never stopped blowing for two weeks, and he can't leave them till they're across." Gently she urged the reluctant youth to enter the house.

With Chilkoot Joe, Clifford went into the rude yet comfortable parlor of the McCades, where wolf-skins were the only floor covering and guns were racked on the walls near tastefully curtained windows.

From an inner part of the house, a pair of wide, dark eyes gazed at him. Then Marigold McCade came forth, an excited flush on the tanned oval of her face.

"Why, you look ever so much—different now," she exclaimed, involuntarily, then paused in confusion.

She had never seen such a young man before. Disheveled, injured, begrimed, she had remembered Clifford Lanier as a prisoner like herself of Black Luke McCade, a prisoner who had leaped up to fight with the fury of a panther in a mad scene of flaming oil, cursing men and red-tongued guns. It was all something of a nightmarish picture in her mind in which remained only the clear remembrance of that fighting disheveled youth battling the drunken bandits who had menaced her.

Now she was gazing at a young man of a sort she had never seen before. In his fine fitting mooseskins and with his raven black hair he was colorfully different, suggestive of the living spirit of romance. The notched gun slung about his waist gave a grim touch to his appearance. Beaded mukluks spoke of a reckless vanity. This youth was like a figure from the pages of a book. And she remembered that he had fought desperately for her sake.

She could find no words she dared to give expression to. Then, queerly enough she observed that the stripling's mackinaw was burned.

"How ever did you do that?" Mrs. McCade demanded, as she also caught sight of the damaged coat.

There was a short awkward silence into which Chilkoot Joe stepped with a nimble fabrication. "I knocked some ashes out of my pipe onto it, ma'am."

"Goodness, Joe," scolded Mrs. McCade, "you're certainly careless. Cliff, take off your coat and Marigold will mend it. She's a real artist with a needle."

SO the gayly colored coat was taken off and mended. The coat that had been burned in saving Anita Starling. Mended by Marigold McCade. There was something of the prophetic in it.

But now, in this homely household, the youth's thoughts were of the golden-haired girl who had danced her thistle-down way into his heart. He seemed preoccupied.

Mrs. McCade cooked a dinner of caribou stew and dumplings, coffee and dried apple pie. Later they sat before the fire and talked. Whenever Clifford spoke, Marigold listened with her girlish heart in her hazel eyes.

It had been dark several hours and the Bering wind was wailing under the eaves of the sod-walled house when a howling of dogs sounded outside. There followed a whine of sledge-runners, loud voices.

"Who's that?" Chilkoot Joe asked.

"The Nome sledge has come in," cried Mrs. McCade, springing up. "I must get some hot food ready for the men." She hurried off into the kitchen, followed by Marigold, while Chilkoot Joe and Clifford opened the door. Figures showed outside on the snow, a tangle of dogs and two parka-clad men.

"Hey, you, Ed an' Steve," called out Chilkoot Joe, excitedly.

"Hey yourself, you old walrus. She's blowin' cold across the tundra for March. Got to find you a new guard from here on. Packin' forty thousand worth to open water, so you better get a damn' good one."

"Already fixed for a pardner," chuckled Chilkoot Joe. "We'll be mushin' up toward th' pass in the mornin'."

WITH the break of blustery dawn, a short strongly bodied man mushed in from the south trail. His keen, gray eyes were wind-seared, his face was wearied and worn. It was John McCade, tired from vainly waiting for his sledges to get over the range. He rose from his sledge and shook the snow dust from his parka.

"Wind's blowing a living gale up on

the Devil's Desk," he announced to the mail-sledge men. "You'll be stuck in the trail camp—" He paused as his gaze encountered Clifford Lanier.

"Hello," he said in a changed voice. "Who's this?"

"My new trail pardner," announced Chilkoot Joe, promptly. "Cliff Lanier."

John McCade stiffened slightly, his keen eyes reading the face of the boy. A strange silence fell over the other two men as they looked at the young man standing there straight and proud beside the heavily laden mail-sledge.

"So, you are Clifford Lanier," said John McCade, steadily. "It's fortunate for you I wasn't with that posse that found my daughter. I doubt if I'd have stopped one second, Lanier. And I may have made a mistake. As I understand it, you were both taken there by force."

"I was taken there by your kinsman—Luke McCade," replied Clifford, instantly reflecting the grim calm of the fox-rancher.

John McCade winced slightly. "Yes—by the renegade McCade, Black Luke," he said slowly. "And when you fought with Luke and his men, I assume it was primarily for your own preservation. You didn't want to be left there to burn alive? Isn't that right?"

"Perhaps," said Clifford, with a faint, cool smile.

John McCade nodded, as if relieved. "I would hate," he said in a clear voice, "to be under any obligation to a Lanier. I heard, on the way home this morning, that you've got your first McCade."

Clifford Lanier stood stiffly on the snow, gazing at the fox-rancher.

"I have nothing to apologize for," he said flatly.

"I am just stating a fact," returned John McCade, without passion. "Art was probably a tinhorn and a sharp, and his going is no loss. But I'd say there's nothing any Lanier and any McCade can ever have in common. For the good of all concerned, it will be better if we see to it that our trails do not cross again."

"That is what I expect to see to, sir," said Clifford Lanier, haughtily.

The stocky fur-rancher wheeled without a word and strode into the house.

A very short while later, Chilkoot Joe and Clifford Lanier had mushed out from the McCade fox-lay on the rough uprising trail to the south-eastward over the ranges that lay tumbled in their bleak immensity against the steel gray of the sky. Far up there white wisps streamed from the peaks, marking the terrific force of the wind.

As darkness fell, the two men mushed on, determined to make the trail camp at the mouth of the Devil's Desk before pausing. Clifford Lanier drove in silence. He was thinking of Anita Starling. The next stand of the show would be at Seldovia. It was going from there back Outside by way of Juneau and Ketchikan. He thought of the flower-like beauty of the little dancer. Her vision rode with him through the blustering coldness of the night.

The dogs slowed as they struck a steeper slope along the frozen trail. The outfit was traveling through a gulch where the bitter wind was cut off, though it roared in a deep low tone far above. Overhead the stars now shone like a hundred million campfires.

X

THEN another fire, red, wavering, spear-like, told them of the proximity of the trail camp they sought. They came toward it, and mushed into the circle of firelight cast by the flames licking over a heap of alder logs. A parka-clad sledge-driver stood up, hands on six-shooters. One of John McCade's men, he was concerned over the safety of the heavy load of furs he had in his charge. Strangers were to be treated as enemies. He relaxed in relief as he recognized Chilkoot Joe.

There were many others in the camp. Dogs were everywhere. A voice spoke suddenly—a girl's voice.

"Well, if it isn't Cliff!" called Anita Starling. Cliff turned toward her and saw she was seated, swaddled in furs, on a sledge. The entire outfit was on the way through the pass and had camped here in preparation for a hard drive up over the spine of the mountains. A man sitting on another sledge smiled thinly as he gazed at Cliff.

"Smashed any more card men, Lanier?" he asked in a low voice.

"Nope," smiled Cliff. "You know my name, but I don't recall having met you."

"No. We never met. I was in the Nugget when you set into that poker game. We planted Art McCade just before we left Kalvik."

"I think I remember your face now," replied Cliff, watching the man's smile. "You were playing faro over by the wall."

"Right you are. Art McCade was my partner."

For the moment the girl was forgotten. Cliff knew that this man would kill him if the chance broke right.

"You'd smashed him," the other went on. "Smashed him just as bad as if you'd hit him with an ax. Who wants to play with a crooked dealer? His goose was cooked. Then, when you made the big play with his girl, I guess he might have went mad with jealousy."

"His *girl?*" gasped Cliff.

"Lucy here," the gambler continued. "Lucy Lehman."

"You mean Miss Starling?" asked Cliff, trying to keep his voice steady.

He watched the gambler closely, not daring to remove his gaze. He did not see the girl's face darkening with silent fury as she made mute signals to the speaker.

"I mean Lucy Lehman," said the man, his weak slit of a mouth twisting up at the corner. "That's the name her father gave her. Art McCade was good enough for her till we hit these gold camps and dust came her way like common dirt. He paid for her ham and eggs down in Frisco. Art treated her right, too. She don't dare deny it."

Cliff did not believe him.

"Oh, shut up." The girl's voice shook with anger. "Art hunted trouble and got it. If you wasn't drunk, you'd keep your rotten mouth shut. You dirty bum, Art McCade was your meal ticket! Pardner, hell! I'm the one that paid your admission, you cheap tinhorn! Me, little Lucy. I've paid for more than one meal he ate. Bought him and you your hop. Bought her—" the girl's finger pointed to the sleeping woman— "her booze. I'm a fool carrying all you excess baggage!"

She finished with a string of colorful Barbary Coast epithets that would have made a mule-skinner blush. Cliff, white as chalk, made as if to rise. The girl's hand reached and gripped his gun arm.

"Don't kill the hop-smoking punk, Cliff. He's my brother."

Cliff felt sick to the depths of his soul. The gambler laughed gratingly. Dully, Cliff saw the resemblance between this painted girl and the sallow-faced dark-eyed tinhorn. The mother was snoring drunkenly. The girl was sniffling, her tears making crooked rivulets through the daubed paint on her cheeks. The black stuff from her lashes made a sooty track through the heavy powder.

Cliff's hands felt icy cold and clammy. He wanted to groan. Instead he laughed. The sound of his unseemly mirth held the crazy hysteria of a man gone mad. He was on his feet, looking down at the man and the girl, laughing into their faces. Then a harsh order from the screen of alders about the trail wickiups cracked through the icy air.

"REACH!"

One of McCade's sledge-drivers whirled swiftly, clawing for his six-shooter.

The heavy crash of a forty-five sounded from just beyond the firelight. The body of the fur-sledge driver pitched forward into a sprawling heap on the snow, his unfired weapon sliding from twitching fingers.

"Hands sky-high!" came again the cold, clearly spoken command. "There are guns on this camp from every side. No good of any more of you being foolish."

The travelers were all of the same opinion. They raised their hands. Frightened whisperings came from Lucy Lehman.

"Slash loose those sacks of gold on the second sledge, Jack," said the cold voice.

Masked parka-clad figures came close from the surrounding alders. In their loose garments, with hoods drawn into position, the men revealed almost no distinguishing quality between one and another. Yet Clifford Lanier was certain that he recognized the one voice that spoke. Startled dismay struck through him. He began to speak, then paused again.

"Sorry to trouble you, ladies and gentlemen. You'll have to step out of camp for a moment. A mere formality. We don't want your valuables. Only the men's guns."

There was indeed a familiar ring to

that smooth voice. Duke Stores. Lucy Lehman and the weak-mouthed gambler had risen, shaking with terror, to obey the outlaw's commands.

Swift hands had already deprived Clifford Lanier and Chilkoot Joe of their weapons. Now the masked and heavily armed men were dragging boxes containing the gold shipment from the mail sledge.

The tallest figure of the group, the man with the cold voice, stood there, two drawn six-shooters covering the shivering travelers standing off from the fire. The other men were lugging the loot to their sledges.

CLIFFORD LANIER was in a quandary. The leader of these outlaws was certainly Duke Stores. Stores had saved his life; but now he was looting a sledge that Clifford Lanier had been engaged to help protect.

"Look here," he said suddenly, in a low voice, addressing the figure he believed to be Stores. "I—this is a queer turn. I'm mushing with this dust as guard—"

A soft, cold laugh answered him. "Very well. Why worry? This has nothing to do with — personal matters that may have gone before. This is business. You're guard. What would any other guard do who found himself covered and disarmed with a dozen guns on him?"

Cliff slowly answered.

"Nothing, I guess."

"Of course. A sledge guard is under no obligation to commit suicide to protect dust in his care. Your personal identity does not matter in this. You're held up and you can't move. Don't try."

"All right," said Cliff, "but I'm right fond of that gun. It belonged to my father. Will you break out the shells and give it back?"

"If I do, will you promise not to try to slip in a shell and take a sneak shot at me?"

"I won't" said Cliff. "I give you my word."

The masked man jacked the shells from the gun and handed it to Cliff. The youth shoved the weapon into its holster, smiling a little.

"How about my derringer?" asked the gambler.

"Your word isn't worth a plugged nickel, Slick Lehman."

"This man'll kill me," Lehman whined.

"If he does, the Territory ought to reward him. That diamond ring you're wearing looks like one you won from a friend of mine, Slick. I'll thank you for it."

The tall outlaw silently put away one of his guns and drew a clasp knife which he opened by pressing a spring with his thumb. "I hope you won't put me to the trouble of cutting off that ring, Chechako."

Slick Lehman jerked off the ring and tossed it onto the snow. The outlaw stooped and picked it up. For a moment his back was partly turned.

"Pistol-whip him," Lucy whispered to Cliff. But the boy's hands did not move.

The tall outlaw straightened, the eyes in the holes of his mask sparkling as he looked at Cliff. He had heard the girl's words. He bowed toward Lucy.

"Good-bye," he said, coldly. "I wish you a pleasant trip south."

He turned toward his men to watch the lashing of the loot on a light sledge.

"You're either one of that crowd," said Lucy, with cold scorn, "or else you're just a plain damned coward. And to think I almost got stuck on you. Ugh! Slick, open up that whiskey. I need a shot to take th' bad taste of this four-flusher out of my mouth."

"It ain't up to you, miss, to pass talk like that against Cliff," spoke up Chilkoot Joe, suddenly finding his voice in his instant anger. "We're the ones bein' helt up an' not you. When you've been through this several times, you'll know when to fight and when to sing small—"

CHILKOOT JOE swayed, his eyes flashing with sudden pain. A startled groan broke his speech, then he lurched limply onto his face. At the same instant there had come a snarling crash of gun-fire from the farther windy darkness beyond the alders.

Clifford, wheeling involuntarily, saw the tall, masked bandit also reeling as if shot. But he still kept his feet, and both his guns were belching red buds of flame against the crimson flashes blazing into the camp.

Bullets slashed through wickiups, plowed into the snow; one shattered the runner of a sledge. Both the outlaws who had just completed the hold-up and their victims were being attacked by a second group of bandits.

Clifford hastily reloaded his six-shooter and took shelter behind an outcrop of granite. Guns were flaming everywhere in the icy night. The tall bandit who had directed the hold-up fell on his back. His mask slipping away revealed in the fire-light the cold tragic face of Duke Stores. From somewhere near came the bellowing curses of Roaring Jack.

Clifford began picking out the forms that moved behind the flashing red tongues of flame of the second group of attackers. He fired to deadly purpose and brought down two of the ambushers. Then a gun roared almost at the side of his head, a shower of flame flashed before his eyes and he lurched against the granite where he crouched, half stunned.

Dimly, as if through a mist, he saw a thin savage face—a face that he instantly recognized and that left him convulsed with futile writhing effort. It was Black Luke McCade, thin-cheeked, sneering-lipped, eyes stark, blazing. The killer, laughing raucously, kicked the limp body of Clifford Lanier, trampled on him and passed toward the sledge laden with gold, around which the first band of outlaws lay shot down, dead and dying.

Without pause, Luke McCade started the dogs harnessed to the laden sledges and swept off into the night.

MORNING, cold and icy clear, revealed three crippled groups of travelers mushing slowly from the fatal trail camp below the Devil's Desk. Upward, across the ranges, headed the shaken and shattered show troupe, sodden with whiskey. Westward, toward the fastness of the ranges, went Roaring Jack, bandaged and cursing, bearing on his sledge the gaunt Duke Stores, white with the loss of blood from a wounded thigh.

And north toward Kalvik mushed Clifford Lanier, grim-faced, pale, the left side of his face clotted with blood. On the otherwise empty sledge rode Chilkoot Joe with a bullet through his ribs and completely unconscious. The gold shipment and the blue-fox furs were gone.

XI

NEAR midday, as Lanier approached the McCade fox-lay, he came unexpected upon the body of a dead Aleut breed. The man had been shot through the heart and lay on the snow in a blackening pool of blood, a gun in his dead fingers, a twisted smile on his flattish face. Clifford recognized him at once. He had seen the Aleut several times at work about John McCade's place.

Clifford paused to place boulders over the corpse to keep off wolves, temporarily at least. Then he mushed on swiftly, filled with dismay and forebodings. Before long he came upon a smashed corral, wire and posts in a tangle.

Lanier's alarm increased He had seen such a sight before. The time when Harry McCade had been murdered by his cousin, Black Luke, and the blame foisted on Arnold Lanier. This was the savage, black-hearted destructiveness of a sheer vandal, a man without conscience, without mercy and withal possessed of unlimited cunning and treachery.

Evidently Black Luke McCade had struck here in a ruthless raid the night before. Driving upward toward the Devil's Desk, he had come upon the trail camp in the midst of being held up, and had looted the looters thereof, then mushed onward.

"Blast him," muttered Clifford and hastened on. An odor of smoke struck his nostrils. As he emerged from the alders on the trail, a sight burst upon his vision that sent cold horror through him.

THE cabin of the McCades was in charred ruins. Nothing was left but the four sod walls. The first glimpse of it reminded him terribly of the appearance of his father's smaller shack, when he had returned to find it burned. The place was deserted, the wolf-dog wickiups empty, fox-runs torn down.

Not a wolf-dog remained on the lay, nor a blue-fox in the lower runs. Inside the walls of the house stood the remains of burned furniture. The raiders had all but

torn down the place. Nothing of value had been left undamaged.

On the snow was a maze of sledge trails, the imprints of mukluk-clad and booted feet. Clifford, reading the sign, saw that not all these had been produced by the raiders. Other men had come from the direction of Kalvik, a large posse of them, and had mushed on, up into the ranges. Most of the footprints in the snow concentrated about a wickiup to which was still tacked a note. Clifford went toward it and read words that filled him with anger and fear.

This is some pay for killing my father and burning his cabin. I am taking charge of your daughter Marigold and of your fur shipment at the trail camp. By the time you read this I will be aboard a Russian seal poacher on the way to Anadir. Damn all McCades.

CLIFFORD LANIER.

THE youth read that ghastly message over and over. Had both John McCade and his wife been murdered? Was an infuriated posse of men already seeking him up in the ranges?

It was a terrified Aleut in a round-domed *barabara,* hardly a mile from the McCade lay, who told Clifford Lanier what had happened.

"Yesterday John McCade him go Kalvik to buy some things," explained the Aleut. "When John McCade gone, plenty men come, make all hell. Make burn house, make break fox-lay corrals, take Marigold. Mrs. McCade him no can see faces for snow fall thick an' parka hood cover up to eyes. By-m-by John McCade come home, make *kristuck*—crazy. Him go Kalvik again. This morning sourdoughs come. Him say mush for get you an' hang in McCade place where house burned, *aah!* Me savvy you no him, fox-stealer. Me savvy him Black Luke. But sourdough, him too mad."

Clifford Lanier's senses reeled. Again Black Luke had struck an incredibly foul blow, in which were mingled robbery, revenge, cunning treachery. He must have had Marigold McCade a prisoner when he made the attack on the trail camp.

Black Luke's outlawry had reached its highest pitch. After this there must be an end. Either he would escape across the Bering Sea to the havens of the pirate sealers or he would be taken. He could for the moment inspire the fox-men with a blind murderous desire to seize Clifford Lanier and punish him for this crime but before long the truth must come out. Chilkoot Joe, for one, could swear that Lanier was in the trail camp at the time this outrage was perpetrated. But for the present the fox-men would be in no mood to wait to hear what Chilkoot Joe Pelly could tell them. And the old sledge-driver might die from his injuries without ever regaining consciousness.

Gradually the warning voice of the Aleut penetrated Lanier's thoughts.

"You no stay here," the other was insisting. "S'pose sourdoughs come, him kill!"

Clifford nodded, stony-eyed, white-lipped. "You take Chilkoot Joe here," he said to the Indian, "and mush to Kalvik. To the doctor. *Chuckalooden*—quick."

The Indian assented and began getting together his snarling dogs, while Clifford Lanier traded sledges with the native, so as not to have to move the wounded Chilkoot Joe. After obtaining some dried salmon from the Aleut with which to feed his own hungry dogs, he mushed swiftly away.

IN the infernal note left by Black Luke McCade on the wickiup of the razed fox-lay was a definite clue to his destination. It was indeed probable that Black Luke intended to go aboard one of the sinister black-hulled seal poachers that lurked off False Pass and Unimak Island, and make his way to Anadir.

Thus reflecting, Clifford headed not up into the wilderness of the peninsular ranges but along the level tundra of the Bering coast. To the westward, the mountains cut out sharply to the sea. It was there, near the mouth of Grisly Canyon, that the sealers commonly sought the shelter of Cathedral Rocks in their traffic with the outlaws of the coast.

In the falling of a snow-flurried darkness across the white slopes of the land and the hillocky desolation of the ice-pack to the north, Clifford saw a red spire of flame burning above the distant black loom of the Cathedrals—three lonely pillars that sheltered the mouth of Grisly Canyon from the wintry fury of the Bering Sea.

Lanier gazed at that beacon which soon

vanished from his view as he approached rockier traveling. He drew a deep breath, and his blood ran strongly in his veins. Ahead was his enemy. Ahead in Grisly Canyon, signaling a sealer into the Cathedrals.

Grisly Canyon. Sinister title for a ghastly spot. A twisting high-walled crevice, steamy with warm sulphur water that trickled a torturous course from the lofty white-shrouded crater of Pavlof Volcano. It led from the spine of the ranges down to the reef-guarded cove within the black Cathedrals. Its vast reaches were a safe meeting ground of fur-raiders, seal-poachers, fugitives on the way across the Bering Sea. Along the winding snow-streaked rocky floor lay the bleached bones of unburied dead men.

Its walls, rocky, broken and treeless, seemed to echo the whisperings of men lying in wait to murder other men. When the icy Alaskan blizzards screamed through the granite bleakness of Grisly Canyon, the Aleuts swore that they could easily hear the shrieks and groans of the dying above the hollow roaring of gunfire.

Here it was that Duke Stores and his men had waylaid a pirate-sealer crew under the leadership of a huge Russian known as the Bering Wolf. They killed the Wolf and eighteen of his men. Only a Tukutche breed, a mere boy, escaped. The rest were shot down without a chance. The attackers got twenty thousands dollars' worth of fur-seal pelts that were being transported across the peninsula to a codfishing schooner on the Pacific side.

But pirate sealers still landed off Grisly Canyon; and other men died in there from time to time. Two outlaws settled a dispute over stolen gold by fighting a handkerchief duel. Their friends left them where they fell, with empty six-shooters and riddled bodies, left hands holding grimy silk scarfs even after the devil claimed their souls. Rusting guns clutched in skeleton hands, the faded scarfs held in bony clutch, the two skulls grimacing a last snarling hate at one another.

Grisly Canyon had been dedicated to the furies of the frozen North. Every so often this altar of icy hell claimed it human sacrifice. Its rough walls gave shelter to those armed travelers of the wintry night who came to plot and kill. Its ghosts whispered and moaned and shrieked when the Bering gales tore through the alders and sent flurries of snow swirling over the ragged granite walls.

CLIFFORD LANIER mushed alone into the canyon. A rifle lay on his sledge battens. His notched six-shooter was in his hand. Discounting all odds that might be piled against him, he mushed on in search of Black Luke McCade.

Dusk had now thickened into a cold darkness, made more blackly opaque by the depth of the canyon floor.

Lanier's boldness in entering that dangerous place was not without strategy. Reckless strategy to be sure, but it held an element of success. He reasoned that Black Luke McCade and the renegades with him would never expect an attacker to enter Grisly Canyon in the darkness of the night. The murderous thieves would feel the security of their position there behind the Cathedral Rocks and would be somewhat careless. There was no danger of a government cutter prowling about, for the ice was still solidly massed against the coast. They were waiting for the Russian poachers to signal them from the edge of the floes, and their attention would be mostly drawn that way from lookouts somewhere in the upper reaches of their outlaw kingdom.

Cliff mushed warily, muscles taut, nerves whetted to razor edge. His wolf-dogs felt the menace of the bleak and sinister gorge, and padded along uneasily, skirting boulders, ruffling the fur on their necks, and snarling occasionally in their throats, as if fearing unseen things.

A gust of bitter wind sighed like some dying man. A wolf-pack howled, traveling the crest of a distant ridge. A cougar screamed like the wail of a woman in mortal pain and sent a shudder over Cliff, though he had heard the sound before in his life and knew what it was. He quieted his bristling dogs with soothing words and mushed on in the thick blackness of the night.

A few stars glinted above and he knew that the moon would lighten the place somewhat in an hour or so. A white frozen ghostly moon. A moon that would send

its gossamer beams to make a target of the stranger who mushed there behind his dogs. Cliff welcomed the present darkness that cloaked his coming.

A bat winged past his face unseen, its flight marked only by the ghostly breath of its wings. A snowshoe rabbit, caught in the jaws of a prowling wild fox, squealed its death notes. A rock broke loose and rattled down into the black maw of the gulch. No wonder the Aleut breeds feared the place. It took a man with cold nerve to fathom the night sounds of Grisly Canyon.

The wolf-dogs started at each sound, fangs bared, fur erect on their necks. The urgency of the drive made a few seconds seem minutes to Cliff Lanier, a few minutes hours. He had been through the place by daylight, but now he could recognize no landmarks.

Still no moon. It must be near midnight. He wondered what was happening to Marigold McCade. He dared not believe what his fears told him. His heart went cold with anxiety. The girl's shy loveliness haunted him; he found himself dwelling on the skill with which she had mended his mackinaw; the glowing warmth of her gaze when he spoke to her. If anything had happened to Marigold. . . .

XII

AHEAD the canyon narrowed. It was but a few feet across. On either side rose sheer granite. An ideal place for an ambush. A rock-walled trap.

"Who is that!" The challenge ripped the chill silence like a pistol-shot.

Lanier's huskies stopped. He slid off his sledge, his rifle barrel poked ahead of him. The dogs retreated against the rocky side of the canyon, growling harshly. From a shelf of rimrock a crimson flash bit into the blackness.

Cliff shot twice at the gun-flame. As the threshing body of the wounded man fell from its perch to the floor of the canyon, Cliff ran forward. From both walls came the crashing fire of hidden rifles. A man shouted orders, mingled with curses. Cliff crept along on the trail.

Something moved ahead of him among the rock masses. He halted in a low crouch, as motionless as the cold rock he leaned against, rifle ready. The bulk of a man seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth.

"He got away, curse his soul!"

Cliff straightened and swung his gun as a club. A harsh grunt from the sagging bulk. Cliff struck again and the man was a huddled lump in the trail. Without halting to learn the extent of the outlaw's injury, Cliff stepped across the motionless form and crept on toward the spot where profane comands were coming. His otter-clad feet made no sound. The blackness hid his movements.

THE man had quit cursing now. Cliff halted, listening, trying to silence his breathing. His heart was pounding in his throat until he feared it could be heard ten yards away. His nerves pulled taut, he crouched in the darkness, laying aside his rifle and drawing the notched six-shooter that had been Arnold Lanier's.

"Whoever it was," growled a voice, hardly beyond arm's reach, "he got away, damn th' dark, anyhow. Who do you think it was, Luke?"

"How do I know? I have no owl eyes, you fool. And what do I care who it is? Somebody to throw lead into me. Art's gone, they say. Clifford Lanier killed him. Wish I knew whether that was true or not. Maybe it's a lie to break my nerve. But I have a feeling it's the truth. I think this is the last play, and if it is, it's going to be a hot, fast one," he ended bitterly threatening.

"Maybe it was Lanier."

"Lanier! How'd he get in here? They'll probably have strung him to an alder by now. They don't know anything about his handwritin', and they won't waste much time reading that note. Go down and shut up those dogs of ours."

Cliff huddled close to the rocks. He could not move without being heard. To obey Luke McCade's order, that man would have to walk right into him.

The crunch of mukluks heralded the fellow's coming. Cliff leaped to his feet and sprang sidewise as he shot. The outlaw cursed, hurled himself at Cliff, shooting as he jumped. Cliff jerked his gun trigger as the man's weight struck him, and they went down in a slugging heap.

Something like a white-hot iron burned Cliff's thigh. A crashing, searing pain seemed to paralyze his whole left side. The heavy, sagging, inert bulk of the dead outlaw was on top of him. Cliff knew that he was badly hit. But his mind worked swiftly.

"I got him, Luke!" he croaked. "Lend a hand."

A shadowy form loomed out of the chilly darkness. Black Luke came as a loping animal-like run.

Pain and nausea sent Cliff's senses whirling. The body of that heavy hairy-faced dead man on top of him seemed to be smothering him.

Cliff, from beneath the dead man, shifted his gun just as Black Luke cursed and thumbed the hammer of his own weapon. Cliff's shots answered. Something warm and sticky struck his face. Luke's slugs were smashing into the dead body that held Cliff down beneath its soft limp inertness. Cliff shot again. With a rattling scream, Black Luke pitched forward, mouthing curses as he tried to get to his knees.

SLOWLY, painfully, Cliff struggled from beneath the heavy bulk that had served as a breastworks and saved his life. He tried to stand, but his thigh ached agonizedly. His left side was tingling and burning. Wet ran down his mooseskin garments.

Crawling cautiously forward, he made his way toward that blot of darkness ahead that was Black Luke. The infamous outlaw lay in a heap, moaning and snarling like a wounded animal as his hands searched for the gun that had slipped from his grasp.

"Lay still, Luke McCade," croaked Cliff. "I've got you. Move and I'll kill you!"

"That you, Lanier?"

"Yes, and I'm taking you down to Kalvik."

"That's one on you. You got Art, didn't you?"

"We shot it out," said Clifford.

"And he's dead?"

"Yes."

"I knew it. I'm dying. Don't shoot. I'm all through. There's a bottle of Old Crow somewhere. I want a drink, Lanier."

Cliff crawled off and found the bottle. He knew that Luke McCade was not lying. A jolt of raw whiskey might help him talk. Cliff felt the need of a stimulant himself.

He found the dying renegade and handed him the bottle. McCade sat up, gasping through clenched teeth.

"Pull off my mukluks, Lanier. Don't want to die with 'em on. I'm—I'm partly Russian and I go with the Siberian notions that a man dying in his mukluks will walk the tundra."

The gurgle of the aromatic liquor followed Cliff, moving in a daze of pain, pulled off the dying man's mukluks.

"I'm done, Lanier. Dying. Shot twice through the middle. You got me. But I knew it was comin'. Followed me a long time, didn't you?"

"Yes. But I wanted you alive—to talk."

THE moon would be pushing over the ranges in a few moments. The pale rays of its rising already shed a faint glow over this grim canyon of death. The face of the dying man showed ghastly clear. It was a bold, handsome face, etched by hardship and dissipation. The eyes that had been hard and cold and merciless were glazed with pain, dark with the shadow of coming death.

Cliff Lanier had seen men die, but he had never shot at a man and watched his life ebb slowly from him. The deep mystery of life and of its passing were borne home to him as he handed the whiskey bottle back into the fingers that were too numb to hold it. The odor of spilled liquor hung in his nostrils. Forgetting his own pain, he watched the blanket of death being pulled by an unseen hand across this man who had boasted of his crimes.

The graying lips of the dying outlaw moved in a twisted smile.

"God, Lanier, you're an awful fool. You fixed me, but—" Luke McCade tried to laugh. The only sound that came from his throat was a rattling cough.

"Who killed John McCade's brother, Luke?" asked Cliff Lanier, a fear gripping his heart.

"Arnold Lanier, your father, killed him."

"Tell the truth, man!" Cliff bent closer, peering into the pain-twisted face that seemed to mock him with a deadly hatred.

"Dying men don't lie," chuckled Luke. "Arnold Lanier did the trick. Hang you anyhow. You spoiled my game here." He lifted the bottle shakingly and gulped more liquor. "Blast you, Cliff Lanier."

"Where is Marigold, Luke?"

"Where you won't find her," sneered the outlaw. "Gone—with the sealers. Aren't you glad you found out?"

"You mean that—"

"I mean," croaked the dying man, huskily, "that I'm playing my string out. You shot me. I'll be gone directly. But I'm raking in the chips from this last jackpot. If Stores or Roaring Jack ever ask you, tell them that Black Luke McCade died like he lived—hard. Hard—and game. Tell 'em that—"

Black Luke's voice sank to a weak whisper. Clifford bent closer, sick with the pain of defeat, hoping to catch some dying word that would rekindle hope in his heart. McCade leered mockingly into his anxious face.

"Good-bye . . . fool!" The man tried to laugh even as the death rattle choked him. He was dead.

ANOTHER lost soul had joined the ghost ranks of Grisly Canyon. A gust of icy wind moaned over the granite walls of the vast gulch, like the passing of unseen things in the night.

Cliff Lanier sat there, bitter tears trickling down his cheeks. His hunt had ended in this. In his hand was the long-barreled six-shooter with its notched handle.

Cliff looked at it for a moment, his bitterness giving way to something akin to calm. He had used his father's gun as a weapon of atonement. The weapon had failed him. He had seen a man wounded by that gun, die swiftly, clutching at a slipping life. A shudder of revulsion swept him. With a sharp cry he flung the gun as far as he could.

Vainly he groped about the camp of the outlaws. He found the Nome gold shipments, or part of them, also sewed bundles of fox-furs. But Marigold McCade was not there. Had the girl actually been sent aboard a sealer?

Cliff heard the groaning of two bullet-torn men near him in the cold darkness. Men who perhaps were dying. One of them seemed to be calling his name. As he started to answer, a sound of other voices came to him from up the canyon.

XIII

THE next instant the gulch was again marked with spatting gun-flames. Clifford dropped flat behind a mass of granite as lead slugs snarled an inch over his head and showered him with broken chips of rock.

"Surrender, you snipers, or we'll shoot you down where you lie!" called a harsh voice through the booming echoes of the canyon. "Up with your hands, all of you!"

"I am the only one here," called out Cliff Lanier. "The rest are dead or wounded."

Men and dogs moved downward. In the white gloom showed the death-head face of John McCade.

"Where is she, Lanier?" he asked, in a hoarse unnatural voice. "Talk quick before I kill you!"

"I don't know where she is," replied Clifford, bitterly. "I trailed up here after Black Luke, I've—just had it out with him. She's been taken aboard a sealer, Luke said—"

"There's no truth in you!" cried a savage voice. "It's a rope and gun-slugs for you, Cliff Lanier. You got away from us once, but you won't again."

"I helped swing your father, and I'll help hang you," sneered another voice. "Th' quicker th' better—what is that—"

Weird, unearthly, a groan had sounded across the bleak sinister chaos of the vast canyon, like the sob of some condemned spirit. An instant startled silence fell over the assembled throng of sourdoughs. The wolf-dogs growled, ruffs bristling. The ghosts of Grisly Canyon moaning?

"Listen," came that harsh gurgling voice again. It was one of Black Luke's men lying wounded at the very base of the granite wall that seemed to act as a gigantic sounding-board in the wintry gloom. "Black Luke is the man who got Harry. Luke—is the man you want for what's been done today." Again the man's words gave way to an agonized groan that echoed and sobbed weirdly in the depths of Grisly Canyon.

"Black Luke was born a killer. I would

never open my mouth while he was alive, or he'd 'a' got me. Now he's gone—and I'm goin'—"

"And that's the truth," came the sighing response of the other wounded outlaw. "It was Luke—"

FROM below came a faint gleam in the icy darkness. The avenging posse, still shocked and awed by the words of Black Luke's men, remained silent as the wailing cries of wolf-dogs echoed and re-echoed throughout the canyon. Mingling with them came a bellowing shout.

"If that's you, Roaring Jack, hold your lead," Lanier cried out. "It's Cliff."

"Who's with you?" challenged a voice.

"Men from Kalvik," replied Clifford Lanier. "They're looking for Marigold McCade."

"She's here, all safe. Gave Black Luke the slip in the dark. But she almost got into worse trouble. Ran onto a bunch of sealers landing below the Cathedrals. We were looking for Luke, when we heard her scream."

There was a general movement forward of the sourdoughs behind Lanier. A man stood revealed there in the white gloom. It was the burly rollicking Roaring Jack. On the sledge behind the dogs sat the unsmiling white-faced Duke Stores. From before him rose Marigold McCade. With a little choking cry, she ran to her father, who caught her in his arms.

SLOWLY, very slowly, John McCade released his daughter. His lips trembled as he strode up to Duke Stores and Roaring Jack and Clifford Lanier. Tears, unashamed and unchecked, coursed down the man's weather-stained cheeks. When he could find his voice he spoke.

"Stores," he said, "I've fought you since the day I started a string of blues in this region. I'd sworn to kill you. Tonight you force me to take back that oath. My door is open to you. What I have is yours. You have spiked my guns, you men. I have to apologize to you, Clifford Lanier. And Stores, I'd like to shake your hand as a friend."

But Duke Stores did not take the proffered hand. Sitting erect on his sledge, his face chiseled by bitter tragedy and the torture of some memory of the past that would never sink into oblivion, Duke Stores, reputed to be the most dangerous man in the Alaska Territory, gave answer there in the ghostliness of Grisly Canyon.

"What we did, McCade, was not for you and we ask no favors. Your ways are not our ways. Our trails run in opposite directions. You owe us nothing. We'll keep away from you for all time. Between us will be a truce. A truce, nothing more. Between us there can never be friendship. It's not in the blood."

THEN Duke Stores turned away brusquely. As he called to his powerful gray wolf-dogs and mushed from that desolate spot to where his men waited below, there was something splendidly courageous about his loneliness. Brooding, tragic, mysterious.

John McCade turned to the jocular, merry-lipped, yet cold-eyed Roaring Jack.

"I guess there's truth in Stores' words," said McCade, slowly. "We don't use the same trails, Jack. But all the same I'd be proud to somehow pay for what you've done for me."

"Better forget it, McCade," chuckled the rotund Roaring Jack. "Gawd knows we've stole a-plenty off you. You're more of a man than I ever thought. Never knowed you had one of them organs called a heart. But seein' as you have one, I'm just sayin' this. Cliff Lanier is no outlaw. Guess you know that now. I'm thinkin' one of these days he'll turn out to be a prize son of yours—'count of a commissioner collectin' a marryin' fee. First thing your girl wanted to know after she got over her scare was where is Cliff an'—"

"You hush up there, Jack!" came a girlish command, in which laughter mingled with tears.

"Clifford Lanier," came the voice of John McCade, "I think it's time we buried the hatchet—"

He stopped short then, for there had been an unseen movement in the gloom, and two figures had merged into one. Clifford Lanier was past hearing any words then, for he was holding Marigold McCade in an embrace that left her breathless, starry-eyed, as she raised her face to his.

Stalker of the Death Trail

By ARTHUR LAWSON

Bob Batten, half-dead, burning hate where a heart had been, chased a phantom through the snows. He had but one thought in his tortured mind: "Kill Barbarossa for the thing he did!"

BLACK Forks! Hell's Annex! Where red liquor rawed the toughest throats, where yellow gold glittered free and crimson blood flowed wild. Black Forks! Where the Northern Lights danced their crazy jig, sending weird shadows to haunt the drifting snow. Black Forks! Where the king might be a bum by the rise of the noon-day sun, where the bum might be a King by midnight. . . .

In those early days just after the big rush, no man's fortune could be told from one moment to the next. In those early days, Barbarossa was *The King* . . . Long Bob Batten was *The Bum*. . . .

Long Bob Batten wasn't the Bum of Black Forks yet. But he was on his way, madly driving his tired dogs through the sleet storm on the road to hell. He'd been on his way for a long time now. Six months? A year? Who knows? There was no time element in the game that Long Bob Batten was playing. Any time was the right time to kill Barbarossa!

The whip cracked sharp above the dogs, the voice of the driver cut through the screaming storm, but the malamutes could pull no harder. There'd been seven of them once. There were only three now. Two had died on the way, two had been butchered and eaten during the last two terrible weeks.

Batten's right leg pumped stiffly, automatically. His left swung heavily from the hip as if it were weighted with lead, and the burning pains rolled in searing waves up his thigh to his back. But he grinned to himself in the frozen blackness of the night. This was old stuff! He didn't mind it any more!

Then he stumbled and fell on his face in the powdered snow. And the agony of his leg faded and he dreamed that he was in a warm log hut on the outskirts of Dawson. He could hear the dogs outside, scrapping playfully among themselves, settling down for the night. The kettle was simmering happily on the stove . . . and over on the bunk was his partner and pal kicking off her rough hob-nailed boots. . . .

"When the Chinook comes we'll be headin' for home!" he said. "But it's not so bad here. . . ."

"With the logs crackin' like that in the stove it's pretty cheery," Ruth had answered. "But the winter's are so long. . . ."

The song of the storm rose to a high eerie scream. It was warm here and comfortable, but the black back of the cariole beckoned him on, and the feel of the whip-handle in his fist was a solid reminder of his errand. Painfully he pushed up to his knees and peered through the rasping snow. The malamutes had dug themselves in for the night.

He stumbled forward, kicked feebly at the snow-humps that hid his team, and the three remaining dogs after so many weeks of incessant pulling wobbled to their feet and tightened up on the traces. Batten fell in behind the sled. It seemed to take forever to make one step forward. But. . . .

LONG BOB BATTEN was the Bum, and Barbarossa was the King! Barbarossa was the King, but he hadn't been crowned by his loyal subjects. In those days in Black Forks they didn't do things that way. Barbarossa was the King because he'd taken the crown and no successor had appeared yet to take it in his turn. And Barbarossa remained the King because he put on the best show in town and any lonely bearded miner could come to the "Bucket of Blood" and squander his hard-won dust on burning liquor, or hold a painted woman on his knees, or watch the yellow-haired gal dance on the bar . . .

She was dancing on the bar that night, dancing on the long pine bar with her golden head in the blue smoke fog, with her golden slippers flicking in the faces of the bearded miners.

"Wake up, Mister!" Goldie whispered.

The giant Barbarossa watched from the side, the broad smile on his thick lips half-buried under the curling red beard, the queer burning look in his eyes unnoticed while everyone stared so intently at the dancing girl. Now she dipped, now she swayed, now she kicked out her golden shoes. And the house gasped and the piano stopped, and she jumped lightly from the bar-top and vanished into the back room. The house was a pandemonium, with men stamping on the floor, with men yelling and whistling, but Barbarossa stepped forward, his hand held high, his bellowing voice cutting through the din:

"All for now, Boys! Name your drinks! They're on Barbarossa, Boys! And heat up your pianey, Johnnie. Give the boys some real music!"

He cut around the back bar, escaping the rush, swung through the door and ran lightly up the steps to the second floor of his honkatonk. There was a pale strip of light showing under the second door on the right. Barbarossa snapped up the latch and walked in.

"Why in hell don't you knock?" The girl clutched her dressing robe about her slim shoulders. Her blue eyes sparked as she flung her head sending the golden hair cascading down her back.

Barbarassa's oiled smile thickened.

"What did I tell you about swearing?" His voice was oiled, too, but the oil was thin. "It ain't ladylike!"

"It's the only language you understand!" she snapped.

"No it ain't!" The oil flowed free. "There's another language I understand. For instance. . . ."

"Don't pull that old gag on me again!" Her voice was heavy with scorn as she cut in. "Love . . . as if you knew what it meant!"

He stepped forward hesitatingly. The girl backed away and he stopped. His blazing beard bristled menacingly, and his half-closed eyes slitted. Then he tried to smile again, the he-man, the gentlemanly stuff!

"It's the McCoy," he said. "I mean it. That's why I ain't touched you yet. It's the McCoy this time, Queenie. That's why I ain't let you out to the other fellers."

The girl laughed shrilly, half hysterically.

"And *that,* I suppose, is why you shot Long Bob when he wasn't looking and lifted his dust and blew up the shack on him. You make me. . . ."

He sprang forward, grasping her arms above the elbows. For a moment he held her tightly before him, towering over her, glaring down at her wide fearless eyes. His fingers bit deeply into the soft flesh and slowly he bent her arms back until her small hands lost their grip on the throat of her gown, until her shoulder blades ached with the pressure. But still her blue eyes were laughing at him, and her red mouth was mocking.

"He's dead now . . ." The big red-bearded man's tongue licked at his lips. "And you're mine. In time, you'll see sense!"

His hands slid from her arms to her shoulders, his fingers clawing at the thin wrap as if to rip it from her body. But still her eyes were coldly calculating, her lips set in a defiant smile.

"Get out of here," she said coolly. "Let go of me, or I'll begin yelling!"

"Go ahead!"

SHE tried to twist away but failed, and he pulled her close again. Holding her tight with one arm, he slowly bent her head back until she was looking straight up into his heavily bearded face.

"Go ahead and yell!" he repeated.

"The boys downstairs will tear you apart," she answered. "I stand in pretty well with that gang. I've never cheated on them. They wouldn't just sit and listen to me hollering."

Slowly Barbarossa's grip relaxed. He, too, had seen the look of adoration in the rough mob that patronized his place. That gang knew only two kinds of women, those that they'd give their gold for . . . and those that they would give their lives to protect. And Queenie was not the kind that they bought. Barbarossa, himself, had seen to that!

Smiling triumphantly, the girl pulled her wrap close about her slim body.

"And next time you come I'll begin hollering at the start," she said. "I won't wait for you to dislocate my shoulder first."

"Next time it won't do you no good to holler!" He backed away toward the door. "We're pulling our stakes, Queenie!

Next time there won't be any mob of fools handy!"

The girl slammed the bar on the door when he left, and listened until his heavy steps sounded down the hall. Then, quickly, but deliberately, she began packing her few belongings in a heavy canvas bag. A few pokes of gold-dust went in with her bangled dancing costume and thin short dresses. And, from under her pillow, she fished a moose-hide money belt heavy laden with dust she'd stolen from her master, and a long-barrelled, evil-looking Frontier-model Colt.

Humming softly to herself she flung off the wrap, stuffed it into the canvas bag, and swiftly began climbing into her heavy fur clothing.

BARBAROSSA might be the Bum upstairs in his Queen's chamber, but he was the King in his own barroom and gambling hell. He was the King, and he acted the part, the benevolent King who said howdy to all his old acquaintances, who welcomed strangers with free drinks and a chance to show how much dust they carried and how easy it would be to wring it from them. Everyone hated Barbarossa as much as they loved the golden-haired Queenie. Everyone hid their hate as carefully as they could.

"How's it going?" Barbarossa slapped one of the bartenders lustily on the back. "Big take tonight?"

"Yessir! One of the best."

"How's she going?" Barbarossa inquired a little more quietly of a dark-faced Irishman leaning up against one end of the bar.

"Not so tough, Chief!" Square-faced Riley answered cautiously. "No easy money here tonight. No new stuff. The same old gang!"

"Anything doing?" Barbarossa asked the heavy-set, ape-faced gunslinger at the other end of the bar.

"Dead as hell!" Jake Snell growled. "Either the boys are drinkin' too much or they ain't drinkin' enough! Ain't nothin' doing."

The heavy door swung open, letting in a whirl of drifting snow, a bitter bite of the arctic wind, and an ice-caked, storm battered, shadow of a man. And even here in the north country where human wrecks are a daily occurrence the roistering mob stood back to watch the stranger limp up to the bar. He walked queerly, that fellow, as if he was about to die. As if his left leg had died already.

"Ain't nothin' there!" Jake scoffed.

"Yuh can't tell!" Barbarossa answered.

The barkeeper poured out a full glass of whisky, a full glass of Barbarossa's worst rot-gut, in answer to the stranger's muttered request. And the stranger, reaching deeply into his pocket paid for it with a gold coin, not the dust of the usual currency.

"Maybe I was wrong?" Jake said.

"You wasn't!" Barbarossa came back. "From up river. Been workin' for a big company on wages. Those boys never have anythin' worth the trouble!"

"Maybe he does come from up river," Jake answered. "But he's loaded with company dust or he'd never of come down this far in this weather."

Barbarossa glanced down at his right-hand man. The red beard bristled.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Keep your eye on him. When he thaws out, pump him."

"Okay."

The stranger finished his whisky and, leaning over the bar, whispered to the barkeeper. The barkeeper glanced down toward Barbarossa and Jake Snell, jerked his thumb in their direction, and filled the glass again. Slowly the stranger half turned, then stared fixedly at the giant with the red beard.

"He don't look right to me," Barbarossa told Snell.

The stranger pushed away from the bar. Apparently the whisky had done him good, but that left leg still dragged painfully as he tottered down the long room; that gaunt, bearded face looked like the mask of a dead man.

He came to a stop in front of Barbarossa and Snell. For a moment the Bum stood staring into the face of the King, and the King with the red beard stared down slightly puzzled at the caricature of the man before him.

"Have you got a gun on you. Barbarossa?" the stranger asked. "I've been hunting for you a long time. If you have a gun you better pull it. I'm going to kill you!"

Barbarossa did not understand the strange speech, but his body-guard, Jake, caught the significance of every word.

"Thank him for tellin' you, Chief!" he suggested. "Then I'll throw him out!"

"I didn't come to kill you," the stranger said wearily. "Pull your gun, Barbarossa. I don't have much time . . . or patience!"

Haltingly, Barbarossa reached for his shoulder-holster, taking his orders from the burning eyes and frozen voice. But quicker than he, was the stranger. The Bum's hand slid from the slitted parka, flicked forth a long-barrelled .45 Frontier. And Jake Snell, the ever-ready body-guard, kicked swiftly up with his heavy-soled boots, smashing full into the groin of the stranger.

The Bum folded up silently while Barbarossa's first shot whistled past him splintering into the bar. But the giant's gun lowered quickly, poised for the second shot, and the body on the floor lay deathly still.

"Ain't no sense in shootin' him!" Jake Snell pushed up Barbarossa's wrist. "We'll toss him out, Chief. Same results. It's a cold night!"

Square-faced Riley had run up. Barbarossa glowered at Snell. But the two handymen picked up the stranger, one by the hands and one by the feet, and took him to the door. A moment later they returned slapping the snow from their clothing.

QUEENIE heard the shot downstairs, and then she heard the door slam and Jake and Square face swearing outside. She ran to the window and looked down while the two men frisked the stranger and tossed him into a snow-bank.

"I was wrong," Jake said. "He ain't got a thing on him. But he's from up-river, okay. I wonder where he put it?"

Square-face mumbled his answer and the two men went back into the saloon. Johnnie struck up an especially gay dance tune, and the brief silence of a moment ago was wiped out in another mad whirl of gaiety. But the dark blot on the snow was very still.

The girl upstairs lashed tight her canvas bag and was ready to go. Leaving the candle burning by the small iron stove to make it seem as if she was still in the room, she quickly threw the bag from the front window and jumped out into a deep snow-bank. The bag landed close to the dark figure, and when she leaned over to pick it up she saw the man move slightly. The long form of the stranger attracted her strangely. And hadn't they said that he was from up-river?

"Say mister . . ." she began, kneeling down beside him, lifting his head from the snow. "Did you know a feller called Long Bob up the river? Did you ever hear of Long Bob, mister?"

The man's eyes were closed, his curling yellow beard still matted with frozen snow. It was bitterly cold that night, and deep in her bones the girl could feel some of the icy bite that was killing this stranger.

"Can you walk?" she asked. "I'll help you to where you can keep warm, mister!"

But the stranger had lost all power of movement. His eyes flickered open momentarily and closed again. A fleeting smile seemed to pass over his stiff face, and his lips opened to mumble a few unintelligible words. The girl knew that he would die if left there another half hour. But maybe that half hour would cost her the freedom she needed so much.

Swiftly she glanced about, tensely listening. Then with quick, deft kicks she buried her canvas bag of precious belongings in the snow and started dragging the stranger down the canyon-like pathway. She couldn't pick him up, but she did manage to get his shoulders on her hip, and she could just barely get along that way.

Down a stretch, then south along another snow-canyon, was a little shack where an old miner lived alone. He'd once said: "I've a gal jest like you back home, Queenie. But she don't know I'm a murderer, an' I ain't goin' back to tell her. She's just like you, with sunshine in her hair an' eyes like cornflowers!"

Queenie knew that she'd be safe there. And maybe Placer Joe would be able to help her get to Dawson.

The door swung in on the cozy shack, and the miner smiled his welcome. Then, realizing who it was, he took the burden from the girl, dragged the stiff body inside and shut the door against the iced wind.

"Where'd yuh find that, Queenie?" he asked.

She smiled wanly. Her words came short and clipped.

"Barbarossa had him thrown out. But I couldn't leave him there to freeze, could I?"

Placer shook his gray head. Carefully he brushed the snow from the gaunt man's face, pulled off his mukluks, and began rubbing the circulation back into the cold body.

"Ain't froze. Just worn out, I guess. An' they throwed him out into this night!" Dolefully, he shook his head again. "Barbarossa will get his one of these days. Maybe this stranger will deliver it. He looks like a capable lad." Placer glanced up at the girl who was casually watching him. "But howcome you're out, Queenie? Barbarossa won't like it!"

"I know," she agreed with a small little laugh. "I didn't ask his permission. I'm beating it!"

"Goin'?"

"Starting tonight, Placer! Do you know where I can get some dogs and someone to drive them?"

Placer's smile was broad.

"I've got seven malamutes myself!" he said. "They're as fine a string as you could find in all Alaska." Fire glittered way back in his watery blue eyes. "An' if you want to go to Hell, Queenie, I know the road an' will take you!"

Impulsively the girl threw her arms around the old gray miner and kissed him bravely on the forehead. Then, blushing crimson, she jumped away.

"Look, Placer! The corpse is coming to life!"

The stranger was sitting up uncertainly. His gaunt hands shoved back through his curling yellow hair pushing back the fur hood of the parka. The lamp-light shone in his face.

For a moment the girl stared wide-eyed. Then, suddenly, she jumped forward to kneel on the floor beside the man, to take his head in her arms and look down into his fevered eyes.

"Bob!"

The man smiled very faintly. Then a quick violent look of hatred swept over his worn features, and he struggled to get to his feet.

"Where's Barbarossa?" he muttered. "I've come for Barbarossa!"

The wild effort was too great for him, and he caved in cold on the rough dirt floor.

THEY made a queer household through the days while they nursed Bob back to health. The few of Placer's friends who came to the shack saw nothing queer in his taking care of the stranger. But many a time Queenie had to climb under the bunk and curl up out of sight while the miners stayed and talked. It would never do to have them find her there. Barbarossa had offered big awards for her recovery. But. . . .

"They say she's got lost an' froze!" one of the men told Placer. "She didn't even take the stuff she packed for the trip. It was found buried in the snow in front of the winder she jumped out!"

"She's jest travelin' light," Placer answered. That gal's too tough to freeze. She's in Frisco by now!"

Under the bunk the girl smiled to herself. She wasn't in Frisco! And she hadn't taken the road to hell with Placer. But, if her guess was right, she was on the way to heaven . . . but not by the route they thought she'd taken.

Finally, one day, Long Bob opened his eyes. The blue of them was still dulled by fever, but a healthier color showed in his pale cheeks. Surprised to find himself in bed, he pushed up on his elbow to see where he was.

The girl, sitting by the stove, saw the movement and ran to the edge of the bunk to look down smiling on him.

"You've been sick," she explained. "But you'll be better soon, and we can start for outside!"

He smiled wanly from the blankets.

"I thought I was dreaming of you. I didn't think you were real. Are you?"

For proof she pinched the back of his worn hand and kissed his brow and ran to get him some hot, nourishing food. She could hardly keep from running out to find Placer Joe, to tell her old friend of the great miracle. . . .

"I thought you were killed. They said that you were but I couldn't believe it. I was going back to Dawson to find out!"

The man's pale eyes flashed.

"I have been dead . . ." he said. "A year . . . maybe more? But I'm alive now." His brows puckered. "Or am I just dreaming this in a snow-bank somewheres, dreaming what I've wanted to dream for so long?"

The girl held the deep bowl of soup while he drank slowly.

"No! It's all real. It's no dream."

"Then I did kill Barbarossa?" He glanced up at her.

"Sure!" The girl's lips twitched and her eyes grew darker. "That night in his honkatonk. You got him with your first bullet!"

A look of absolute peace came into Long Bob's face.

"Then, when I'm better, we can take out another claim. We'll strike it rich this time, Girlie. And we'll go back to Seattle loaded heavy!"

"Sure!" she agreed. "We'll find a bonanza. We'll make a fortune!"

The door swung in and Placer Joe quickly closed it behind. He was panting heavily from the change of cold air to warm, from running down the snow-canyon street.

"We've got to dust!" he gasped. "Barbarossa's found out you're here! We've got to run!"

The girl's mouth opened in a silent scream. The thin body of the man on the bed stiffened.

"Barbarossa," he puzzled. "I thought you said I killed him?"

Placer Joe glanced swiftly from Bob to the girl, back again. He'd been slow to grasp the situation.

"You did!" he lied. "You got him that night! But Barbarossa's men are still around hunting for Queenie. We've got to beat it!"

"Queenie?" Long Bob seemed dreaming again. "Who's Queenie?" Suddenly the blood rushed to his face. "You two are lying to me!" he roared. "Barbarossa is not dead. And you're Queenie now!" His eyes were black with horror. "Your own name ain't good enough for you now that you're Barbarossa's girl!"

"But I'm not!" she insisted. "Barbarossa never. . . ."

The sick man threw the blankets roughly from him and jumped out of bed.

"I'm going. . . ."

He reeled toward the door. Then the giddiness of the fever swept over him, and he fell heavily back against the old man. Placer caught his shoulders, and he and the girl put Long Bob to bed once more.

"We can't go now!" the girl said to Placer. "We can't move him!"

"We've got to!"

"Okay," the girl answered. "You go out and hitch up your dogs. I'll get Bob ready to move!"

But when Placer came back half an hour later the girl had vanished. And Long Bob was in the bunk exactly as he'd left him!

BY midnight everybody in Black Forks had heard that Queenie had returned to Barbarossa's establishment. And by midnight nearly everyone in town was on hand at the "Bucket of Blood." Queenie was going to dance again . . . and free liquor would flow once more.

The mob reeled and roared around the great log barroom. The girl's laughed shrilly and the men howled with them; the bartenders running up and down worked wildly to fill orders, and Johnnie at the piano pounded out tune after tune. But at one end of the bar was a tall Irishman, and at the other an ape-faced gent with two holsters strapped to his thighs. Both men were cold sober.

Queenie, dressing in her room upstairs, heard all the ramifications of the noise below, and in addition she heard the quick yelping of malamutes out back. Dogs had yelped before in Black Forks, and men had caroused. But not like they were doing tonight.

She tied the last bow on her frilled costume, and, laughing quietly to herself, went over to the door and suddenly jerked it open. Barbarossa jumped back with surprise.

"Peeking, huh? You shouldn't pant like a bull when you're peeking. Then maybe I wouldn't of known you were there!"

"Was just waiting!" he answered roughly. "I'm not letting you run away again."

"You hope!"

The girl ran past him and down the hallway and stairs, and, turning right, headed for the barroom. Barbarossa, following closely on her heels, hesitated while

she went inside, and waited until the wild burst of cheering had subsided slightly. Then, adjusting his beaming countenance, he opened the door and stood by the bar beside the girl.

"Don't kill yourselves in the rush!" he howled. "Name your drinks, boys!"

The bedlam was terrific. But when Johnnie's piano tinkled and the girl danced, a queer silence settled over the room. Then, when the girl was done and ran out back they called her for an encore, and another. But after the third she could not dance a fourth, and when her bare back vanished behind the door, Barbarossa held up his beefy hand again and offered another drink. Just before he left, he glanced swiftly at Riley, quickly at Snell. The two gunmen nodded almost inperceptibly. Jake followed. Riley started edging slowly for the front door, working his way against the close-packed mob.

"Are the dogs ready?" Barbarossa asked.

"All set!" the ape-faced gent answered. "All loaded. Me an' Riley will foller in half an hour. Right!"

"That's right!" Barbarossa answered. "Did Riley do the job upstairs?"

"All done!"

"Then you stick here!"

"Okay." The gunman nodded.

Barbarossa ran upstairs. He could see that the door was barred by the light cast on the frame, so he knocked gently on the panel.

"What do you want?" The girl's voice was hard.

"Let me in!"

"Try and get in!" the mocking answer came back.

But you don't fool a great man twice, not if the great man's Barbarossa! And, hardly exerting any strength at all, he pushed against the door, sending it slamming back on its hinges, the bar crashing to the floor.

The girl screamed, jumped back toward the bed. Thinking that she was safe with the strong bar up, she'd been changing, getting ready to run out again.

Barbarossa walked slowly toward her, laughing cruelly as she cringed on the bed and fumbled under a pile of fur clothing for the gun she'd hidden there. His red beard was a flame, even his red eyes seemed to burn.

"Had one of the boys take out a couple of the bolts. Easy does it!"

Her hand closed over the butt of the Colt.

"And it won't do no good to yell!" he went on closing in on her. "I've got the boys posted an' your mob is too drunk to move." He was towering over the bed now. The maliciousness in his eyes had faded slightly. Triumph had driven it out. "Now, give me a big kiss, Queenie. And then get ready to move."

The girl's lithe body curled suddenly and the old Colt jumped into the open. But Barbarossa stood facing her, smiling enigmatically.

"I'm going to pull the trigger!"

"Go ahead!" He leaned slowly across the furs. Old Jake sure had good ideas some times. "One of the boys took out the cartridges!"

The hammer clicked emptily. Laughing at her horror, Barbarossa took it from her unresisting hand, flung it across the room, and reached for her bare shoulder.

PLACER JOE'S plan was rather watery. But a wet plan is better than none when you have a madman on your hands and a girl running loose on the edge of the Arctic Circle.

"She'll be back," he insisted to Long Bob. "I've got the team all hitched. She's just gone out to look at the dogs!"

"She's gone back to Barbarossa!" Bob was stubborn. "She went back because she thought I couldn't travel tonight. She wanted to save my hide."

It was obvious that Batten was telling the truth, but still Placer insisted on his first story.

"Or maybe she's gone for a walk, to limber up," he said. "I'll go find her. I'll be back in five minutes."

"Make it ten!" Batten answered quietly.

The moment Joe had gone, Batten climbed painfully out of bed and searched around for the clothes he'd been picked up in. He was so weak from the days in bed he could hardly stand to dress and when he was ready to leave he had to sit down for a few minutes to regain his strength. He tested the old .45 and slid in new shells, and filled his parka pocket with gleaming copper bullets. Then, smiling to himself

he stood up again and shuffled out into the cold.

The bitterness of the night struck like molten lead at his chest but he limped on until he hove up in front of the "Bucket of Blood." A yellow flicker of candlelight showed from an upstairs window, and the bedlam of the barroom seemed to rock the heavy log walls. Batten grinned to himself, shoved open the door.

A tall, dark-faced fellow stopped him, stared into his face.

"I don't know you," Square-face said.

"I don't know you either!" Batten answered. "Move over!"

Square-face bellied up to him, but Batten stood his ground. Suddenly, the gunman saw a flicker in the blue eyes of the stranger, suddenly he felt the hardness of a revolver squeezed into his stomach.

"You one of Barbarossa's boys?" Batten asked calmly. "Where's Barbarossa an' that Queen lady."

"He's upstairs," Riley answered shortly. "But you won't want the gal now. You better go home."

The gun-barrel jabbed deep into his belly.

"What have you done with her?"

"It ain't what we've done," Riley began. "But the Chief is. . . ."

Batten's eyes froze like glacier ice, his voice was brittle.

"Show me where they are!"

Riley hesitated, then reluctantly showed the way. At the bar he made as if to swing around, but the quick jump of the gun in his back made him think better of it. But at the door he saw his chance, he signaled one of the barkeepers, waited until that gentleman fished out his sawed-off from under the bar, and then jumped precipitantly forward.

Batten couldn't see what was going on, but in the massed crowd was one man who hadn't missed anything. Placer Joe's ancient .45 leaped into action. It bellowed once just as Riley jumped and the bartender jerked convulsively and fell to the floor. The second barkeeper grabbed up the sawed-off and let it go, but Batten's shot cracking him amidships ruined his aim and Riley collapsed with half the buck-shot in his head. Batten fell with a slug in his thigh, and the bartender dropped dead on the top of his mate when Placer Joe plugged him through the neck.

The place was a shambles. Miners were running wildly for the door, stacking up double behind overturned tables, or trying to hide behind their more drunken companions. Girls were screaming, and men and women both were milling around stamping on those who had fallen in a frantic drunken haste to get out of gunshot. And Placer Joe, always having an eye for the dramatic, calmly capped the party by jumping on the bar and smashing the oil lamps with two quick sure shots at their globes. The first bartender tried vainly to get up from the weight of his dead compatriot. Riley was as stiff as a board.

Batten managed to get to his feet and pushed through the back door to the corridor. Jake Snell let fly point-blank in his face, but in the darkness only came close enough to singe the wild-man. A split-second later, Long Bob had cracked head-first into the gunman's belly and the two were writhing together on the floor. Snell's gun barked again, but Batten twisted aside. And then a shadowed form came through from the barroom and a voice spoke hoarsely.

"I'll handle him. Turn left an' upstairs."

Batten, recognizing the throaty intonation of Placer Joe, pulled free of Snell's clutches just as his wiry old friend landed like a puma on the gun-thrower. He started upstairs, but Snell reached out and tripped him, and when he got to his feet again the gunman was pumping lead as fast as he could in his general direction. The slugs were ripping up the stair-treads, splintering the walls as Batten left the miniature inferno behind him. But Long Bob almost laughed aloud in sheer exhilaration.

THE second floor was dark. For a moment Batten stood, his head whirling from fatigue, listening for sounds. To the right he picked out the creak of a bed and a muffled cry followed by a guttural curse. He waited hardly long enough to reload, then plunged recklessly on.

By the ghostly glow of the Northern Lights reflected through the window he saw a bulky shadow moving toward him with the speed of a high-powered projectile. Then a woman screamed shrilly and the shadow struck him full in the stomach

like the charge of a mad bull, throwing him back across the hallway, smashing him up against the door on the opposite side. He couldn't get to his feet again, but when the shadow retreated he wormed back into the room on his belly.

The racket downstairs killed any faint sounds in the green-tinged room. Nothing moved, all seemed dead, and for a few seconds, while he recouped lost strength and tried to orient himself, he played possum lying flat on the floor.

There was a faint rustling on the bed but he dared not shoot. A slight thud came from the direction of the window, but even that might not be the man he was after. All was silent after that for a while and with infinite caution he came to his knees, held his .45 poised before him.

The voice of the woman came like the first warning blast of an arctic hurricane.

"He's over by the window!" she whispered.

Each man waited for the other to move. Then, suddenly, there was a rasping scratch, and a flare of light lit up the room. From the corner of his eyes Batten could see the girl kneeling on the middle of the bed holding a match over her head. Straight in front of him was the crouching hulk of Barbarossa, the black maw of an eager gun.

Both men, not five feet apart, squeezed their triggers at the same moment. Simultaneously the penciled flames licked out, and the two were so close together they were both burned, scorched by the powder. Time after time they pulled their triggers until finally Batten's gun clicked empty, and summoning the last ounce of his strength he flung the useless weapon point-blank for Barbarossa's eyes.

The gun sailed through a clean arc . . . smashed through the window. He knew that he'd missed. But he could fight no longer, and motionlessly he waited for the giant's finishing shot.

It never came! The light flared up again in front of him and he saw the body of Barbarossa strangely twisted, the head sunk to the floor in a widening pool of blood that was of a darker red than his famous beard. Then, beside him, he heard a faint gasp and the girl who they all called "Queenie" was kneeling there holding a candle in her trembling hand. He was dreaming again, he knew. The same old dream of the frozen nights. . . .

"Are you hurt?" The girl's arm was around his shoulder, steadiyng him.

He tried to smile. Very faintly he shook his head.

"No," he said. "Not enough to bother about." His eyes were apprehensive. "An' you? He didn't hurt you, Ruth?"

She laughed her answer. Somehow she could not muster the solemnness that the occasion seemed to demand. She was free, and Bob was back, and she could be Ruth again instead of Queenie. . . .

"He didn't get a chance!" She stood and held her hand to him. "Come over and sit on the bed. You look sort of peaked!"

She tensed involuntarily as someone came to the door. Then she relaxed again for it was Placer Joe, rather battered, rather gory, but grinning widely.

"We took the fort!" he said. Seeing the slack in Long Bob's back, the broad smile faded and the miner knelt beside his friend. "You ain't hurt bad?"

"Just sort of fagged," Batten answered. "Help me over to the bed, Placer!"

The old miner and the girl carried Long Bob to the bed, stretched him out with a pillow under his head, and carefully set about attending to his wounds.

"Damn!" Bob grinned. "This don't seem real to me!"

"It ain't!" Placer Joe grinned back. "But it will be soon!"

Bob held tightly to the girl's hand, knew the old man spoke the truth, for he read agreement in the girl's soft eyes.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES *A Fiction House Magazine* FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

Queen of the Tundra Men

By SERGEANT DAN O'ROURKE

Kate Rendo was the Queen of the Klondike, her kingdom built on the grave of a man long dead. And then a specter appeared from her hidden past—a tundra ghost risen from the grave to totter the throne she had held so long.

MONTANA BILL backed out of the growling roadhouse at the Forks, his deadly gun still smoking, and roundly cursed the Klondike for an upside down world.

A tin-horn bad man, wild with honest fright, he wanted darkness—the black midnight of an honest December that could help a man to a getaway. But what he was getting was the flimsy midnight haze of a Yukon winter.

Even that Yukon River down yonder was an outlaw. It flowed north instead of south; flowed up instead of down; wandered away up over the top edge of nowhere, climbing toward the Pole. A hell of a world!

Yes, Montana Bill wanted darkness, and he wanted it plenty pronto. Needed it, personal and in a chunk! But here was ghostly twilight. In a few minutes the sun would come ham-and-egging up along the northern edge of desolation at the ungodly hour of 1:01 a.m.! He must get away, must make speed, but speed in twilight meant merging into the shadows and hoping by subterfuge to best the red-coated law that would soon be on his heels.

He shivered at the thought of the Royal Mounted. Then he cursed himself. Montana Bill, was he? Self-tagged, self-bragged, and now self-branded. Over fifty, back home a humble tobacco merchant with a modest and friendly game running in the back room, up here in this roaring camp he must doll himself with the raiment of a gambler and announce himself as a bad, *bad* man.

Once self-tagged, he had swaggered and lived up to his label, had played a crooked game and fattened out of the pokes of the miners. He had fattened until he was fool enough to match his tricks against Ben Carter, sure-thing man from the Barbary Coast. Carter had trimmed him proper.

With a borrowed fifty dollars he had wandered out to the Forks to trim the up-creek roisterers. Then what? More of the Montana Bill foolishness. More swaggering—until a crusty sourdough had called him, and some real shooting became the only way out. Real shooting. By a fluke he had shot quick and true. Now he was in truth a bad man. In the flash of a gun he had become a bad man. In the flash of a gun he had become a fugitive in the land of the relentless Mounted, an amateur desperado suddenly elected to notoriety as a real brawler and killer, a guilty shadow.

MONTANA BILL, gunman, filtered into the hush of the hills, creeping upstream, his dainty boots gnawed by the trail's ugly teeth, his fine linen wilting with his own nervous perspiration.

The fugitive visualized the potential shadows pursuing him. With the dawn now but a few moments away, the roadhouse gang would come hunting him, the upstream gang from Discovery clear up to that heart-breaking cabin at Nineteen above—the whole upstream gang, who had known him at Dawson, and who had bogged down under his bragging about Montana and gun-plays! Sure, they'd be on his trail, all right!

Worse than the angry gang were those bulldog, red-coated things, the mounted hornets of the Canadian Yukon. What should he do? Keep on out and hide, or double back to town, roll a drunken miner and, with ready gold, hire a launch for a quick run down river?

He crouched in the shadows trying to think. He shivered. He pictured the empty twilight-smudge as peopled with regiments of bright red. Once that red-coated demon of the law took up his trail he was gone, just an amateur flop with his make-up washed off.

He stumbled on upstream again, a shaking desperado. Suddenly a memory

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"It's your choice," Laurie said to the gambler. ". . . Guns or gold!".

struck him. He had heard the news at the Forks, only to have it scared out of him by the shooting. Sure, here was his way out. Ben Carter, the gambler who had fleeced him and bowed him out with a pitiable fifty, had struck it rich. That much-ridiculed upstream claim, the last one, way up, number Nineteen above Discovery, had come in strong. Ben had grabbed the first dust and raced back to town for a frolic. A wild frolic till his bundle, Kate Rendo, dance hall queen, had rounded him up and bundled him out to the claim that she might learn the truth for herself.

They were up there now, way up at Nineteen. . . . Sure, that was the play! Go out to Nineteen and come clean. Carter would stake him. Sure! Just between sports. Carter would stake him to the price of a quick cruise in a launch. Of course, he would. Bet your life . . . ! And if he wouldn't? . . . Carter had fleeced *him*, hadn't he? Well, then. What's a little hold-up between friends?

With new courage Montana Bill, silk-hatted and soft-booted, stumbled on upstream, making for the ragged lump of a shadow that would be Carter's cabin.

II

IT had taken many years of dancing in the gilded ranges of Barbary Coast for pretty, titian-haired Kate Rendo to save the money to buy a place and set her man up in business. Many years, because Ben Carter was long on loud waistcoats and strong for fancy cigarettes. When she had bought it she named it Carter's Place, and while Ben loafed and gambled, she slaved and ran it.

When the Klondike had called Ben Carter, with its lure of sudden and gorgeous wealth, it was the proceeds from the sale of the Carter Place that had outfitted them and taken them to Skagway. It was Kate's nerve that got them over Chilkoot Pass, and it was Kate's persistency that got them below the rapids and loaded them on a river raft below White Horse.

Down river, when the Yukon had borne them through its dangers to Dawson, it was Kate who whipped up a dance hall, assembled girls, stocked the booze, and earned Ben Carter's grub while he loafed long at the card tables and occasionally meandered up the creeks and floundered helplessly. Finally, on one of them, he lazily staked number Nineteen above Discovery. He staked Nineteen because nobody else wanted it. Eighteen had proved to be barren, the pay pinching out at Seventeen.

Again it was Kate Rendo's earnings that hired men to prospect the claim, with Ben idling about the gambling halls. Time and again Nineteen above showed pay, but the strike proved to be only a shallow pocket, or a narrow, pinching lead. In that first winter Nineteen above developed enough pockets to satisfy the most ravenous school kid, and enough false leads to supply a Broadway playwright with a lifetime of failures. In derision, Dawson had dubbed the thing Heart-Break Claim, and freely joshed Kate Rendo about it over her own bar.

The woman from Barbary persisted. One day a test shaft, sunk deep down in the creek bed, struck pay, and the Heart-Break blazed as a bonanza, pulling Eighteen back to life along with it, and proving Seventeen to be a false prophet.

Ben Carter raced out there at the news, and strutted in pride over the strike on *his* claim! Summoning extra labor from the gulches, Ben sat through a day of feverish panning of the rich gravel, then raced back to Dawson to throw *his* dust over many bars and summon his cronies for feasting.

As Montana Bill had heard it at the Forks, it was late at night when a cool and determined Kate Rendo collected him, bundled him into a wagon, and headed for Heart-Break, to sit down on the fortune that had come to them.

THE driver, with orders to return early next day, trekked back, leaving them out there alone, their workers, newly paid. gone to the Forks to celebrate. In the pitiable log cabin they sat at a rickety table. By the light of a single candle Kate Rendo went into the battle of her life.

"I grub-staked you to this claim, Ben," said she. "Don't forget that. And under the law of the Yukon, half of it is *mine.*"

"Forget it!" he snapped. "You are my bundle. You've been my bundle a hell of a long time. This gold mine belongs to *me!* It's *mine.* To hell with you!"

"Just a minute, Ben," she went on pleadingly. "I've been your bundle a long time, yes. And you have had things easy. Damned easy, I'll say. Now we are both getting old. You are fifty-five. I am—well, I'm no chicken. Let's be sensible. Let me run this gold mine. You take it easy, and I'll run it. Then we'll take the money and go home. We'll be fixed. Well fixed. We'll never see another chance like this, Ben. Let's use our heads for a minute."

"To hell with you!" he sneered. "This is my picnic. I'll let you have your Dawson dance hall. That's enough for a skirt. This place is mine. Get me? *Mine!*"

"But, Ben! It's coming to me. I've worked for you for years. I've been square. I gave up my baby. I bought the Carter Place for you. I've worked and worked. I made the money to get here. I've made the money to keep this work going. Ben, be fair! We've struck it at last, but it's half *mine!*"

"Half, *hell!* It's all *mine,* I tell you! Behave, or I'll ship you outside."

"No, you won't, Ben," she answered, with a sudden courage. "No shipping me outside. I'm Kate Rendo. I have

some rights. I'll call a miners' meeting. *They* will give me my half. That's the rule of the grub-stake. But, better than that, Ben—" She hesitated before going on. It was a great moment for her. "You marry me, Ben. Now's the time. Marry me. Then, if anything happens to me, it will be *yours*."

"Huh! It's mine, right now."

"You better think it over. If I get my half through a miners' meeting I can do as I please with it. I might even marry someone else. Oh, yes, I might! I'm not so old but what I'd look pretty good with two or three million in the bank."

That checked him. For the first time in his life the drone of the underworld sat under the gun. He could only curse wildly as his bundle smiled in triumph. Helplessly he sought refuge in delay.

"Don't be rash now, Kate," he begged. "Marriage is the bunk. We've got on fine for twenty-five years. Why muss things up? I'm not going to ditch you now. Don't you worry. I'll do the right thing. We'll talk it over. Tomorrow. Just trust me. I'll fix it. Yeah. Now, you rest here. I want to look around."

He lurched out of the cabin. He wanted time to think. He feared a miners' meeting. He hated marriage. He must cajole, delay, and trick.

He went out into the midnight haze. Marry his bundle? Huh! How old Barbary would roar!

KATE RENDO, watching the sputtering candle reach its end, moved to a hazy window and sat thinking. She, too, could cajole, delay, and trick. She could do more. Now she could command, command up to one-half the riches of Heart-Break! She did not propose that Ben Carter should forget her and squander the under, there came to her a stinging re-

As she mused, watching the sun go under, there came to her a stingling revulsion against her life — against Ben and his lifelong demand for sacrifice. Suddenly, she realized that she hated him. Hated him because he had forever and forever refused marriage. Hated him for sending away the child that she had wanted. Hated him now for denying her in his day of riches.

A slave, was she? Well, well! Ben Carter was the whole thing? Well, hardly. The shoe was on the other foot now. It was *she* who was through. With her eyes open at last she was *through*. And half this claim was her own. . . .

Comfortably, she conjured up the rule of the grub-stake. She had only to go to the other claim owners and assert her rights. Once she had done that, Ben Carter would rush to secure the marriage license. Very well. Kate Rendo, the bundle from Barbary, would become Mrs. Carter, Klondike Queen. Once married, she might search for her boy, now a man grown. . . .

Look! There's the red rim of the sun, starting up for a new day! A new day? I'll tell the world! Kate Rendo's day!

III

MONTANA BILL, sick with fear, and weak from stumbling along the rough trail, slipped up to the Heart-Break cabin and stood listening. Silence everywhere. Outside and in, silence. The cabin was still shadowy, but clearer in the growing dawn. It was cruelly crude in its poverty, yet the dark interior hinted the mystery of the claim's new riches.

He noted that the door was open, and drew nearer, straining to catch the slow breathing that would proclaim the heavy sleepers whom he pictured as being therein. Should he rouse them, state his case, and ask aid for his get-away? Or should he. . . .

The temptation to rob tempted him. It fitted his desperate selfishness. Better to rob than to beg. He'd get more that way. Carter would have money on him, plenty of money; Kate, also; and diamonds. Sure, plenty of sparklers on both the fat sports, and probably some gold-dust from the claim! Sure. All kinds of plunder. And they'd be asleep. Probably drunk from celebrating the new strike. Easy. . . .

His uncleaned gun drawn again, he placed a hand on the door-jamb and raised his foot to the threshold.

Ben Carter, strutting in an orgy of greed at the shaft that had finally disclosed the rich pay streak, saw the crouching shadow

and shouted in alarm. The shadow turned quickly, a gun barked, and the gloating Klondiker pitched forward.

The shadow crouched a moment, peering into the haze. He expected to see other shadows taking shape along the dim trail. He pictured guns flashing out of the silence. Impulsively, he cringed against the cabin. But there were no shadows and there were no flashes. Instead, he heard a woman's voice calling from the cabin.

"That you, Ben? What's the shooting? Where are you, Ben?"

Now the crouching shadow realized what he had done. The silent form, prone on the creek floor, had not been a pursuer. It had been Carter, the newly rich, standing watch over his own claim at midnight. More trouble. Damn such luck! What now . . . ? Quick, his pockets! His diamonds! Then the woman. She'd be easy. Scared a-plenty!

"That you, Ben?"

The woman's voice stopped him. He whirled his gun on her as she stood dimly seen in the dark doorway. The voice went on:

"What are you shooting at, Ben? Are you seeing things? Say! What's the idea, throwing a gun on *me?*"

The shadow cringed. He feared the woman would scream.

"All a mistake," he hurried. "They're after me. I thought he was one of them."

Kate Rendo glanced past the armed shadow and saw the prone thing where it lay still, face down. Then she looked closer at the outlaw. She recognized him. She realized what had happened. All eternity through her mind in one second. As she put her hands up she became suddenly calm.

"What's the idea, Montana?" she asked, coolly. "Is this a holdup, or do you think you're jumping this claim?"

At the sound of his name and at her unexpected coolness the fugitive felt a sudden panic.

"I'm jumping out," he declared. "I had a fight up at the Forks. They're after me. I thought he was one of them. I never meant to hurt him. But I need money. I got to make a get-away. You'll never miss it, now you've struck it! Gimme what you've got. Quick!"

"Wait!"

UTTERING the command with the calmness of a veteran trooper, the woman brushed past the armed outlaw, crept to the prone body and sought for a possible heart-beat. Finding none, she returned slowly to the bewildered desperado.

"You fixed *him,* all right," she said. "And you've fixed *me,* too. Plenty. We were going to be married today. Now what are you going to do?"

"I didn't mean to!" whined the fugitive. "They're after me, I tell you! I got to beat it. Gimme what you got around here. For God's sake, gimme it!"

The woman seemed to be thinking.

"Sure," said she. "All you want. But we'll have to pan it. The men only washed a little, and *he* spent it. But if you could —if you could stick around a couple of days, you could wash out a plenty." She stood staring at him in the early dusk, a wild thought pounding at her brain.

"Stick around? Hell! I'm running for my life! You've got money. Quick!"

"Sure, I have money. Plenty. But it's in the bank."

"Well, gimme your sparks. I'll turn 'em."

Instead of complying, the woman sat down on the door sill and folded her hands over her knees.

"Just a minute, Bill," she said. "You'll be caught if you run like this. The Mounted will get you."

"Cut the chatter. I've got to—"

"Have your own way. Here are my diamonds. On my fingers. And there are more on Ben. Go plunder him. Help yourself. Be a thief, if you want to. But if you'll listen, I'll do you a favor."

"Me? A favor! Like hell you will!"

"You've just done me one," she continued. "When I think it over I can see you've done me a big favor. You've made me a widow. This is my claim now. All of it. You've handed it to me on a platter. You may have all you can grab if you're in a rush. But if you'll listen to my plan a minute, I'll save your life!"

The shadow looked down the empty trail. Then, without lowering his gun, he demanded:

"What's your game, Kate? What kind of a Barbary Coast trick are you trying to pull on me?"

"A good one," she insisted. "A peach,

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LARIAT STORY MAGAZINE

if you have the nerve. Which would you rather do, Bill, run from the Red Coats, or ride to Dawson in comfort, take a launch down river, and live Outside, free and easy, from Hell to breakfast?"

"Ride to Dawson? You're crazy."

"You bet I am. Crazy with joy! Look at it my way. Yesterday I'd have killed you for this. Ripped you to ribbons with my bare fingers. But at this minute it's different. Ben showed himself tonight. Showed himself for the skunk he was. I turned. Turned in a minute! Now, I'm glad he's gone. Get me? *Glad!* And you did it. . . . I'm ready to help you. Let that thing out there be Montana Bill. Let the Red Coats take it, and plant it. *You be Ben Carter.*"

"What?"

"Sure! It will be easy. You gamblers all look alike. You dress alike. Your whiskers are all one style. Even your fool silk hats come out of the same box. Silk hats in a Klondike gulch! Don't it give you a laugh?"

"It's a hell of a risk!" complained the accidental bandit, who was a born coward.

"Beats running away from the Mounted. Now, listen. You empty his pockets, and yours. Change things with him. I'll fix the guns. How many shots did you fire at the Forks?"

"Just one. But that was plenty."

"And right here, just now, Ben Carter fired one at Montana Bill. And *that* was plenty. One empty shell in each gun. I'll throw a blanket over that thing. *Mister Carter,* remember, we are going into Dawson as soon as my driver gets back. I'll have you on your way down river before the town wakes up."

The outlaw was breathing hard. His eyes glistened with hope. But he was still suspicious.

"That's your trick," he declared. "You'll keep me here and welch on me!"

"For God's sake use your head!" she begged. "I'm Mrs. Carter here, ain't I? With Ben Carter gone Outside to live I can sit on this claim and mine it. But let them find Ben dead and I'm nobody. I can't prove marriage. You know that. Say, don't you see it, Bill? I'm giving you your life, because you are giving me my gold mine. This claim, by rights, belongs to me. I earned it. I don't want his lazy relatives coming in here and grabbing off half of it."

"You've got nerve, woman."

"Plenty. I've needed it. Twenty-five years on Barbary. Twenty-five years of hell with Ben Carter. . . . Look! There come the Mounted! They are searching the cabin at Fifteen. They'll be at Sixteen in a minute. What's your name, man?"

"Monta—I mean, Ben Carter."

"You're good! Get hold of yourself! Remember one thing more. We don't know a thing about Montana Bill's little party at the Forks. All we know is, *he* tried to pull a hold-up here and *you* plugged him. You are *Ben Carter!*"

"Yeah. I got you."

"All right. Better stand out there and wave at the Red Coats. Yell at them to come running. . . . That's enough. Now, sit here in the door with me. *Mister Carter,* think twice, and answer once! No trimmings. Better let me do most of the talking."

"For God's sake, yes! I'm shaking all over. You run the thing."

A moment later it was a bright-eyed and clever actress who rose to meet the two red-coated members of the grim Royal Mounted as they reined up their sweating mounts.

IV

TAHOE TIM FOLEY and Red Gleason, technically owners of the abandoned Eighteen above, were working at the windlass at Three below on a neighboring creek when the news of the rich strike on Heart-Break flashed by. Taking their pay in dust, and smilingly accepting the showered congratulations on their new chance for riches, they hurried away, Tim mushing over the ridges to sit tight on the claim, while Red begged a ride into Dawson to purchase grub.

Reaching Eighteen above late at night, Tim was hailed by the new night watchman at Nineteen, welcomed to camp-fire coffee, and invited to return to breakfast. Then he spread his blanket on the dusty floor of his own cabin and flopped for a needed sleep. He was roused at five in the morning by the eager Red, who had trekked through the night with their slender store of provisions carried in a light wagon.

"Yup and away!" called Red cheerily, through the open door. "Pardner, we got grub! Wherefore arise, and let me see the light of a fire shinin' out of that there Delmonico range."

"She's on the blink," answered the sleepy Tim. "Some Siwash swiped the stove pipe."

"The pirate! Then it's a camp-fire breakfast for us."

"Not on your life!" retorted Tim, happily. "We're invited out."

"Invited out? Who's givin' the party?"

"Message from the new foreman next claim up-creek. We eats at Heart-Break till we gets our outfit shaped up."

"That's no heart-break for me," Red answered. "'Tis one little message from Heaven. Can we rope this lazy stage driver in on it?"

"The foreman said to shoot the works. Said Mrs. Carter's orders was 'Everybody welcome.'"

"'*Mrs.* Carter?" repeated Red. "How about the old man? Oh, I remember. He went down river right after that shootin'. Didn't even wait for the inquest."

"Left it to her," agreed Tom. "Guess she's always been the man of the family. It was her dance-hall money paid for prospecting that Heart-Break claim."

"Then I'm for her, now and forever," exclaimed the happy Red. "'Twas her money that gave us this new chance at Eighteen."

"Yea, boy! And wait till you hear the latest. Night watchman told me last night. Yesterday's test pans on Heart-Break ran all the way from a hundred and seventy-five dollars to two hundred twenty-five."

Red's eyes stood wide in surprise.

"Two hundred twenty-five? *In one pan?*"

"You said it!"

"Lord!" Red turned to survey the five-hundred-foot-wide strip of creek bed, running from bank to bank, that was Eighteen above. "If the pay streak holds—"

"She's bound to hold," asserted Tim. "Only thing is, the pay streak is deeper down from Nineteen right down stream to old rotten rich Sixteen. Mrs. Carter's money has pulled the upper end of this gulch back to life. I'll bet there'll be a flock of new claims located above Nineteen and that most of them will come into pay."

Red Gleason took a long breath and wiped a moist brow.

"Then thank God for dance-halls!" said he. "What's that name she goes by in Dawson?"

"Kate Rendo. Stage name. Years ago, down on Barbary Coast, she was a professional dancer."

"A dancer herself? Well, she won't have to dance no more. Swede luck."

"Luck nothing!" corrected Tim. "Them that has *gets*. She's a business man. We're the Swedes."

SHOUTS from Nineteen called them to breakfast. Eagerly they hastened across the unmarked boundary between the two claims, taking the hungry freighter with them.

"Where are the birds who staked the claim below yours?" asked the foreman over the pancakes and bacon.

"One of 'em's in Fairbanks," answered Tim Foley. "Last I heard he was prospectin' on Hester Creek. Don't know about the other one."

"Mrs. Carter wants us to get word to them," went on the foreman. "She ordered me to see that their location notices was in shape, to do their assessment work, and to stand off any wandering claim jumpers."

"Say!" interrupted Red Gleason. "That woman's got a heart!"

"You said it," agreed the foreman. "And she told us boys to stake out the rest of this creek, clear to the edge of Hell. Said she'd stake us to prospecting money as soon as she sluices a few thousand out of this here Heart-Break."

The two owners of Eighteen were silent a moment. Then Tim ventured a question.

"Did you stake it?"

"The whole works," answered the foreman. "We put all our names in a hat and drew for procedure. The cook got Twenty above. Night watchman got Twenty-one. Mine's Twenty-five. We ran her clear up to Thirty-two. Nothing left but the upper benches."

"I'm going to bow twice," added Tim, soberly.

At four in the afternoon, when the two owners of Eighteen above had swamped out their cabin, stowed their slender stock

of supplies, turned up their windlass, and were up on a side hill cutting timbers to be used for bracings in their new shaft, Red Gleason saw a cavalcade of four wagons winding up the crude road.

"Hot dog!" he exclaimed. "Here comes the circus."

The procession was headed by a light Democrat wagon, with a woman sitting by the driver, and three lumbering freighters stringing along behind.

"That's *her!*" decreed Tim Foley, joyfully, and with a loud *"Wah-hooo!"* waved his hat in welcome, receiving a quick answering salute.

"How d'yer know so much?" demanded Red.

"'Cause no other woman in the world would be freightin' that cargo up this gulch. Come on, boy. We go washes up an' pays our *ree*-spects."

Kate Rendo Carter, learning from her foreman that the owners of Eighteen had arrived, and being apprised of their need of stove pipe, took two lengths of that necessity from her cargo of freight and with one under each arm started for their cabin. She caught them in the midst of a friendly squabble over one-half of that which had been a hair comb.

"Howdy, boys," she called out, cheerily. "I hear my new neighbors need stove pipe. Will this do?"

"It sure will, if you can spare it, Mrs. Carter," answered Tim, slipping the broken comb to the uneasy Red.

"I brought out a lot of it," she replied. "You are welcome to all you need. Now let's get acquainted. I am Kate Carter. You, sir, with that head of hair, must be Gleason."

"Yes, ma'am," agreed Red, bashfully. "I'm thankful to meet you, ma'am."

"You are most as red as I was," affirmed the woman. "They used to call me Red Kate when I was a dancer. And you, sir, must be Foley. Didn't they call you Tahoe Tim in California?"

"Let it go Red and Tim, ma'am. We want to thank you for the hospitality of your foreman."

"And you may call me Kate," she said, smilingly giving each a hand. "Now sit down a minute. I want to talk business."

SITTING on the side of a bunk she motioned them to the two rough benches that constituted the cabin's furniture.

"Tell me," she began. "Just between friends, how are you fixed for money?"

"Flat," answered Tim. "We got to hit gold before this grub is gone, or go hire out again.

"I blew our last bean for those prunes," added Red, with his smile.

"Don't worry," said she. "Your gold is here and I want to see you get to it quickly. Suppose you let me advance you what you need to hire labor and push the work? My foreman will weigh it out for you as you need it. When you get running, you can pay it back. Ounce for ounce, as you can spare it."

"That would be fine, ma'am, if you care to take the risk," answered the grateful Tim. "You are sure mighty thoughtful."

"If we don't hit it," added Red, "we'll come down and swamp out your dance hall."

"There is no dance hall," she answered smilingly. "I sold it yesterday. My Kate Rendo days are over. From now on I am Mrs. Carter, gold miner. What I want is for us Gulch people to make the whole Klondike respect us."

"You've done that already, ma'am," said Tim. "Everybody knows who it was that pulled old Heart-Break out of the wreck."

"Isn't it wonderful?" she exclaimed, with frank happiness. "Tell me, boys. From where you sit, how does it feel to be rich?"

"We haven't felt it bite yet, ma'am," answered Red, modestly. "We still feel we sort of sneaked in on your good luck."

"Well, hurry the work," she answered, getting down from her perch. "When you hit the pay we will celebrate. You will be over for supper?"

"Thanks, ma'am," answered Tim. "But with this stove pipe we'll be all set. And thanks for your proposition. The loan, I mean, ma'am."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll not worry. My principal trouble right now is to whip up a cook house and get a real cook. You know, I'm so sick of seeing these sourdoughs slopping around a stove in gum boots that I could scream. I'm going to have a crew of colored boys. Cook, helper and waiters. They are going to wear

white. When you come to see me you'll think you're in a dining car."

She was off, moving across the short distance to her cabin with an athletic snap that testified to her years of dancing. The owners of Eighteen stood watching her, their eyes still soft from her friendly visit.

"I bet she was good to look at when she was young," whispered Red, almost reverently.

"She don't hurt my eyes none right now," answered Tim. "Boy, any time you miss me, you'll know right where to look."

Red laid a friendly hand on his partner's shoulder.

"Brother," said he, facetiously, "draw your gun. I shoots this out with you right now. You keep off the reservation. She belongs to us *Millionaire* Reds."

"Millionaire nothing! Boy, you are just kitchen police. Get busy with that thousand dollars' worth of stove pipe. I'm going in the royal butler's pantry and mix some antiseptic biscuits."

"Well, if I must," answered the happy Red. "As the poet sharp says, 'it hates me.' But duty must be did."

IN such a manner did Kate Rendo Carter begin her friendly queening over the warm-hearted and hard-thinking up-gulch men.

Red Gleason, by way of his sunset hair, was suffered to be her chief booster, but no woman ever had stauncher friends than she had in Tahoe Tim Foley and in her own foreman. She mothered the whole district, scolding them into clean habits when they were well, nursing them when they were ill, and, on her own claim, adding bonuses to already high wages.

In the roar of Dawson she became merely a rich woman, busy with her own affairs, operating her own gold mine in her own way. If Dawson stopped to think of Ben Carter at all it was to feel a sense of relief. One more crooked gambler had gone Outside.

Her wealth from Heart-Break was not her only reward. Her religion of spreading heart's-ease brought many dividends of joy. As the killing cold of the Yukon winter set in, the miners turned protectors. They counseled her to go into Dawson, get a cabin, and live easy. She could come out once or twice a week, generously furbundled in a sled, and check the work. What the hell was the use of being so all-fired rich and a woman, and not enjoy it as she went along?

She smilingly accepted their kindly philosophy, took a log cabin in Dawson, buried its floors with smelly furs, blanketed its walls with painted burlap, stocked its larder and sideboard with staggering plenty, and then threw out her happy latch-string to all the world.

Many came, and came again. In the fraternity of the frontier it was nobody's business that the guests she liked best, and detained longest by her blazing hearth, were Goldies from the gilt and tinseled dance halls.

Through that winter she smiled on, her title clear to the riches of Heart-Break, her greatest joy the spreading of her own subtle brand of smiles. In her clean living she taught youth what health might be, and in her warm cheerfulness gave a new meaning to the happy forties.

Through her first clean-up, and on through another winter, she went her smiling way. The second spring clean-up at Heart-Break found her a roaring bonanza Queen, her dust entrusted to the banks, her credits quietly turned into sound American securities, and those securities brought north and locked in her own strong-box. She was generous, yet prudent. She wanted her wealth where she could get at it, look at it, and wallow her plump white fingers in tangible somethings.

During that second summer of the Heart-Break's prosperity, when the wealth of the creeks had become a known quantity and a thing of world-wide speech, the gossip of the gulches said that Heart-Break would run three more seasons at least, maybe four, and that if the Old Lady lived to pack it all away she would carry outside as many millions as there are aces in a poker deck. Even then, if the joker happened to run wild, the odd card might add another million for good measure.

WHEN the third winter set in she did something that turned the whole up-gulch crowd upside down with bubbling pride. Led by Red Gleason the population rose to a man and swamped the Forks with a celebration in which they cried on each

other's shoulders and told the world that their Old Lady was just the golblamedest bundle that ever clumb up over that hellengone Chilkoot Pass!

She abducted that sweet little black-eyed nineteen-year-old Irish girl who had been waitin' table at The Grand to support her invalid mother. That's *all!* Walked right in the day the mother died and kidnapped little Nellie Harrison to be her companion. And moved her to the Dawson cabin where she didn't have to stand off Chechako dudes. Whoop-e-e-e! Here's to our Old Lady! Yeah! And here's another to the *little* Lady! May she live to marry the president of the Irish Free Scrappers!

What of Kate Rendo, of the Barbary Coast, now Mrs. Ben Carter, Klondike queen, with a budding beauty in her keeping? At last she had achieved a bit of her heart's desire to play the mother. From the gentle treasure that nestled in her protection the starved dance-hall favorite learned much of that sweet home life that she had never known.

Yet under her smiles she smothered a fear, and stifled a further yearning. She feared Montana Bill's nasty tongue—would fear it till she was clear of the Klondike and safely at home Outside. Eagerly she dreamed of the day she might seek her son.

Montana Bill, lingering in Alaska, had set up a game in Fairbanks. From there he had turned his knowledge of Kate Rendo's affairs to golden blackmail. The pension, promised on that tragic night in the gulch, had been faithfully sent, but as tidings of the roaring wealth of Heart-Break had come to him he demanded more.

The isolated woman reasoned correctly that the grafting coward would not return to divulge the secret of that night to the Red Coats, but his threats to seek out and inform Ben Carter's relatives worried her. She regarded the claim as rightfully her own. In her helplessness she fought for her rights—fought by paying hush-money as regularly as she would have paid rent on a dance hall. She was fighting for time. Once safely Outside, with her wealth she could laugh at Montana Bill, and fulfill her endless yearning.

Fate crowded her unexpectedly toward her dearest wish. Returning one summer day from an inspection of the work at Heart-Break, which was still roaring along in its golden monotony, she was met at her Dawson door by the gentle-voiced Nellie, who placed in her hands a man's business card.

"He just left it, mother," said the girl, with beaming eyes. "He is at The Grand. He will be back this evening. He wants to meet everybody by the name of Carter. He's from the Outside, mother. And he's just too stunning!"

"Now, now," cautioned Mother Carter, smiling in return. "No romances till we go Outside."

"Oh, but mother! He *is* wonderful!"

"Is he? All right, Chickadee. Let's see what the cards says."

As Mother Carter of the Yukon read the card, her throat choked. She sank to a chair, again plain Kate Rendo of the Barbary Coast. The card read:

LAWRENCE CARTER KENNEDY
MINING ENGINEER

Lawrence! The name she had begged the San Francisco orphanage to give her lost baby. And Carter? Was it an accident, or had God-fearing saints named Kennedy adopted the child and fearlessly given him his name that the grieving mother might know?

She stood staring at the card, hoping, fearing.

"What does he look like?" she faltered.

"Oh, he's about twenty-five, with the grandest Titian hair. Ravishing hair for a mere man. And he has—" The girl stopped, and looked fixedly at her foster mother. Then she exclaimed, rapturously: "Why, Mumsie! He has *your eyes*. Absolutely the same *brown*. Oh, Mumsie, Mumsie—" the girl seized the elder woman in a rapture of hope—"have you been hiding this from me? Is he *your* son, Mumsie dear?"

VI

THE news flew the length of the creeks, and grizzled miners dropped their work to make pilgrimages. When they read the happiness in the Old Lady's eyes they were happy, and when the upper creek gang saw that the boy's eyes were her eyes, that the

boy's flashing smile was her smile, they swamped Dawson with a Barbary Coast celebration.

Born to their own Kate Rendo, discarded by that tin-horn Ben Carter, adopted by some folks named Kennedy, and orphaned all over again by their passing! Then he climbed up over old Chilkoot to find his fortune and just doesn't do a thing but find his own honest-to-God mother. Ain't that some clean-up? Hey, barkeep! Keep 'em comin'!

"Kate Rendo's Kid! Lost and found again. Say, who was the bird that unloaded that old fable about the Prodigal Son? Thought he was *some* writin' sharp, didn't he? Shucks, that runaway boob in his yarn went and played the ponies and then sneaked home to papa. That's all he did. Papa's pet. But what does *our* Kid do? Hey, what does he go and *do?* Jess natcherly gits up early and delivers his papers, and waits on table, and goes to night school, and hustles to heat Hell till he gits hisself a de-*gree!* He savvies gold minin' from the Ace to the Deuce spot. Prodigal Son be damned! We got a red-headed he-boy what's going to be President.

"Hey, barkeep! Whassamatter? You gettin' cold feet?"

When, out at Nineteen above, the foreman offered to resign so that a real mining engineer could take charge, and the young engineer said No, that he would begin at the beginning, tending ditches with a long-handled spade, and for everybody to forget the "engineer" stuff and pitch in and teach him to be a placer *man,* they tore the lid off all over again. They notified the world that there was but one Royal Family in all creation, and that said Royalty abided with them plenty personal and *exclu-sive!*

Happy workmen rushed an annex to the Dawson cabin, and a happy mother installed the Crown Prince therein. Out at Heart-Break the boys stole time from their hours of rest to build a new cabin that was for the Kid, and the Kid had the sense to spend much time there.

But while outwardly smiling, Kate Rendo was becoming more and more silent. Her secret worry burned her heart. Slowly, step by step, she began building against possible calamity. She would tell him if forced to, then hide herself from his eyes forever!

She led the boy through the bulging fortune in the strong-box, gave him equal right of access with herself, and warned him to let no one question his right.

"If anything should happen to me, Laurie, it's all for you. Money, bonds, and the Heart-Break. Don't let anybody say it isn't."

"Nothing is going to happen, mother," he replied. "We will work old Nineteen to the end. Then, old Kiddo, we're going to see the beautiful world from a front seat, you and Nellie and I."

"I hope, so," she said, but her smile veiled her secret fear.

ONE night, over his card table at Fairbanks, Montana Bill experienced a sudden chill. From sourdough to sourdough the news had passed down the Yukon and then had crept up the Tanana to the blind slough that was the site of that Alaskan camp. Kate Rendo's Kid on the Klondike—and the up-gulch gang in love with him!

Montana saw his pretty dream of graft gone glimmering. With a straight-shooting son under her roof Kate would fight blackmail. She'd be nobody's bundle.

He rose from his table, a disturbed crook, to walk the dim streets of the camp to think.

He had assumed that when the Heart-Break was mined out, and would lay under the Yukon sun a heap of rusted tailings, she would return to the Coast to live in golden luxury. He had planned comfortably to follow her there and continue his leeching. But now—

The rumor was that this Kid was a college sharp who could ride hard and shoot straight. Montana Bill cringed at the detail. A hell of a combination! Especially his crooked brain feared the keen reasoning of a trained mind. Kate Rendo's Kid, eh? Born in old Barbary, cast out, and now on the job, trained of eye and hand? Damn Kate for having a kid, anyhow!

In the middle of an oath Montana Bill stopped suddenly. Memory threw an inspiration at his feet. In Dawson there was no Montana Bill. *He* had been

plugged by Ben Carter, checked off the records by the Red Coats, and Kate Rendo had shipped the body outside for cremation. *Ben Carter* was supposed to be somewhere Outside. Why couldn't Ben Carter return again?

After four years there would be few in Dawson to detect the deception. Kate Rendo would have to accept him and say he was the Kid's father she'd have to say they had been married years ago. Then the Heart-Break would be *his,* and Kate Rendo his bundle.

Well, well! Come to think of it, Kate Rendo's Kid spelled luck for his "father."

MUCH to his disgust, "Ben Carter's" arrival in Dawson created no excitement. A strange clerk behind the desk at the Grand assigned him to room thirteen, and a strange barkeep in the grill served him with calm indifference, as if immaculately clad gamblers were his regular diet. Only the lack of ready money held back Bill's impulse to make the rounds of the bars and demand that homage he felt due to "Carter," rich claim owner.

Somehow the town did not seem the same to him. It was more orderly. There were no swarms of grim-faced men milling the streets. There were more substantial buildings and far fewer tents. There was more decorum and less swagger. The man who was playing a part felt a sudden fear of the plentiful Red Coats, jauntily patrolling the quiet streets of an orderly Canadian outpost.

Seeking a livery stable he asked to be taken out to the Carter claim. He volunteered the information that he had important business with Mrs. Carter.

"You'll find her in town," answered the liveryman. "Second street down river, and three blocks to your right. One-story cabin with an ell on each side of it."

"So," thought the counterfeit Ben Carter, "we're living in town, are we? Probably got a grand piano and everything. Well, whatever it is, it's going to be mine. Let's go have a look."

It was late afternoon when Kate Rendo saw him swaggering up the street, his flashy garb out of place amid the quiet cabins. She chilled at first, then steeled herself for the meeting. She was glad that Laurie was at the mine and that Nellie was busy in her own room over her treasured needlework.

She met him at her door and her calm eyes killed his leering smile.

"The Red Coats, Bill," she said quietly. "You'll hang if I tell the truth."

"Sure," he retorted, sourly. "And you'll go to prison for life. Don't forget, old bundle, you sat in on that deal and drew cards. You are what the lawyer sharps call an accessory after the fact. The Queen of the Klondike wouldn't care for that."

"Not very much," she answered coldly.

"No," he leered. "Not so nice. And *our* Kid wouldn't like it, either."

She caught the innuendo.

"'Our' Kid," she demanded, in sudden fear. "What do you mean?"

He smiled triumphantly.

"I remember what you said that night about goin' to get married. You named *me* Ben Carter. Remember that? Let's go round the corner, old bundle, and get hitched. Then you can pass me off as the Kid's dad." She reeled in helplessness at his leering words. "Unless, *Mrs.* Carter," he went on, "you want me to tell him you're Kate Rendo, and nothing but a bundle!"

"Oh, stop!" she begged in cruel agony.

"I thought so," he answered gloatingly. "You haven't told him. Cooked up some lie about bein' married. I suppose. Told him his dad was Outside. Yeah. Well, his dad has come back. Come on, get your bonnet. We'll go say 'good morning judge.'"

The whole world seemed to go from under Kate Rendo's feet. She struggled for thought in her dilemma.

"You are cruel, Bill. Cruel! The boy would hate you!"

"Oh, is he so *nice?* Well, maybe I better tell him what I know about the old Coast. Maybe then he'd listen to reason."

"He'd kill you, Bill. Kill you at sight."

"Yeah. And then hate *you,* for life. Come on, it's my turn to make plans now. Get your bonnet."

"Not here in Dawson, Bill. I couldn't face it. Down river, on the American side."

"Keno!" We'll hire a launch again. Run down and be married. Come back

right side up. Say, this kid never saw his father. You can put me wise how to act. You stack the deck. Then you can fix me a letter of credit and I'll tear outside for good."

Through her panic she caught his real purpose. Marriage, and half the property. Give her son the shadow of a name, and rob him of half his inheritance. She rebelled, but she was too much of a veteran to betray her sudden plan. To gain time she pretended to swing into step with his proposal.

"All right, Bill," she said. "I'll draw a check for you, and you go downtown and have a good time. Give me this evening with the boy. Besides, I must think it all out. I'll be ready in the morning."

"No double-crossing!"

"I'll be ready. But I want tonight with the boy." She was face to face with her desperate resolve to tell her son the truth.

"All right. Gimme the check. You know damn well how to handle me."

She drew a check payable to bearer, and handed it to him. It was for a generous amount.

"Thanks, old sweetness," he babbled. "You're a good bundle. Still got sense, haven't you?"

"I hope so," she replied, cringing under the epithet. "But be careful, Bill. Don't talk too much. There may be someone downtown who remembers Ben or you. One word to the Red Coats would be bad. They have long memories, too."

"Don't worry. I'm Ben Carter. I'll lay low."

"Very well. Good afternoon, Bill. Tomorrow, with bells! Nighty-night."

VII

AS Laurie Kennedy rode into town that evening, his spirited mount cantering gracefully in its superb strength, he saw a silk-hatted, frock-coated figure swagger away from his mother's door. As he rode on toward the stable where his horses were boarded he cast a curious glance at the stranger and received in return a leering smile that instantly roused him.

"So," he mused. "Looking for trouble, eh? Well, believe me, you grafter, you'll get plenty!"

Arrived at the cabin he stood staring about the empty sitting-room. He missed his mother's usual greeting.

"Hey, Mumsy!" he called. "Are you home?"

Kate Rendo, in her bedroom, shivered at the sound of her son's voice. She had prayed for more time to compose herself.

"Yes, Laurie. I am here."

Laurie, missing her habitual buoyancy of tone, sensed that she was troubled.

"No secrets, Mumsy," he called back. "Come out here and tell me all about it."

Trembling, she came out of her room. Noting her paleness, he seized her.

"What's the trouble, dear? I saw a man leaving here just now. Looked to me like a regular Soapy Smith. Who was he?"

For answer she buried her face in his shoulder and moaned.

"Oh, I can't tell you, dear. You would hate me!"

"That so?" he said, stroking her gray curls. "Kate Rendo's Kid hating his mother? Since when?"

"Oh, but you would! You couldn't help it!"

He led her to a couch and sat beside her.

"Now, look here, Mumsy," he said. "It's time for a show-down. Lots of times I've caught you worrying and you've dodged me. Come clean with your boy. Don't think for a minute that anything out of your past can disturb him. In fact, Mumsy, I'll tell first what you are afraid to tell me."

She stared in surprise while he told her.

"But how did you *know?*" she demanded.

"When I was twenty-one the Kennedys told me of my origin, but when I went to look for you on Barbary you had gone. Then they were taken ill and I stood by them till the end. And then I came north. Just to find *my* people. And I found you, dear. Now tell me something. Who is this man who was here today and who left you so worried?"

Encouraged by his friendly arm about her, she raced through the tragedy of that hateful midsummer night.

"Now I know you will hate me," she finished.

"Not after what I learned on Barbary, Mumsy. *You* wanted me, my father discarded me. Have you noticed me at any

time trying to get information from you about him?"

"No, dear. I've often wondered why."

"I'll tell you. For a while after I came here I thought I ought to ask you. Then one night downtown I heard a newcomer insisting that there was a Montana Bill at Fairbanks who had once been here. You yourself had told me that you were sending money to an old 'friend' there. I had wondered secretly why Ben Carter ran away from that inquest. So I put the threads together, like a sensible mathematician, and there was but one answer.

"I confided in dear old Tahoe Jim. He has always said you were the man of the family, and he's a true friend. He took a little run down to Fairbanks where, it seems, he and Red Gleason once made a clean-up. And in Dawson the old sourdough had known both Ben Carter and Montana Bill. He came back, told me what he found, and my answer was confirmed. Just now, when I saw that gambler leaving the house, I knew it must be Montana."

"You've known, then, all along? And you haven't hated me?"

"Not yet. But I see now where I've been wrong. I should have lifted those worries from your heart long ago. Montana Bill's graft—and the other ghost."

"What ghost, my boy?"

"The ghost of your past, Mumsy. You've worried because you have no wedding ring. Haven't you, dear?" She bowed her head, and was silent. "See," he continued, "you *are* worried, and simply because you have been too busy doing for others to think of yourself. Mumsy dear, have you never heard of the good old English Common Law? Your own life has made you Mrs. Ben Carter, *legally*. If you will go into court here in Dawson and adopt me back again, *I* will get you your wedding ring. Maybe I'll get *two*. Maybe Nellie—well, maybe we can all be Carters together."

LAWRENCE KENNEDY had strapped on his gun holster, the kind that nestles the gun up under the left arm and leaves the whole arsenal well concealed by the coat.

It was eleven o'clock that night when he consulted the hotel register at The Grand. There it was, the last name entered. "Ben Carter, San Francisco." He noted that "Mr. Carter" had been assigned to room thirteen.

"I'm surprised he took that room," observed Laurie to the clerk, a new face in Dawson. "Gamblers do not like thirteens nor twenty-threes."

"He kicked a plenty," replied the clerk smiling. "But it was the last vacant room in the house. Do you know him?"

"Well, he claims to be my dad," replied Laurie, pleasantly. "Do you know where he is right now?"

"In the bar. He is buying wine for a bunch. You must be Mister Kennedy."

"Thanks," drawled Laurie. "Maybe you will identify me to my father."

"Identify you," repeated the clerk in surprise. "To your own *father?* Quit your kidding!"

"No kidding, brother. He hasn't seen me since I was a tiny infant. I'm not so sure he ever saw me then. He wouldn't know me without a tag. Come on please, and do the honors."

The clerk, more than a little nervous, led the way to the barroom. There, standing in the center of a motley group, was the man who claimed to be Ben Carter. Wine-glass in hand, Montana Bill beamed on the world, his cheeks flushed, his bragging tongue a bit thick. Laurie heard him raving.

". . . and I'm told she'll run at least six mill'ons 'fore she pinches. Some claim, eh? Good ol' Heart-Break! Some girl my Kate, eh? Good ole bundle. Rich as——"

The clerk approached the braggart with some diffidence.

"Mister Carter," he faltered, "here's a man wants to meet you. Maybe you know him. Mister Kennedy, of the Heart—"

But Lawrence Kennedy had silenced the clerk with a vigorous shove. Standing squarely before the impostor, and towering six inches above him the younger man waited developments.

The name "Kennedy" meant nothing to Montana Bill, but the presence of this stunning youngster asking an introduction was flattering to his vanity. He expanded.

"Glad to meet you, boy," he roared extending a lily white hand. "Say, kid, you

look good to me. Come on and have a—"

"Mr. Carter's" face twisted in pain. His unfinished invitation to drink turned to a groan as Laurie Kennedy crunched the frail hand in his bronzed paw.

"Say!" growled Montana Bill, nursing the injured member. "What's the gran' idea? D'yer think I'm a blacksmith?"

"Why, *papa!*" drawled Laurie, in mock disappointment. "Don't you know *me?* Don't you know your own little son?"

THE group of drinkers laughed harshly in their wine-bred mirth, all except the impostor who was writhing in new pain as Laurie's two hands clinched him in a paralyzing grip just above the elbows.

" 'Son'? What d'ya mean, *son?* Say, cut it out! You're breaking my arms!"

"I mean," drawled Laurie, "that I'm Kate Rendo's Kid. Get me? *Kate Rendo's Kid.* You know! Kate Rendo, from the Barbary Coast? Mrs. Ben Carter of the Klondike? And you *say* you are Ben Carter, her *husband.* That makes you my *father,* I believe. Had you forgotten *me?*"

"Carter" did not hear the jarring guffaw of his convivial guests. He stared with sudden terror at the blazing eyes thrust close to his livid face.

"Kate Rendo's Kid!" he repeated, helplessly.

"*And* yours!"

"Sure. My Kid" beginning to sense his dilemma. "But you don't have to be so damned playful!"

"Thanks, papa. Now that you have acknowledged me so sweetly, I want to ask you a question." The younger man stepped back a short arm's length.

"Sure," answered the unhappy impostor, trying with numbed hands to rub the sore spots on his arms. "What you want?"

"Much information. But before I ask it, I want something else."

As he said it, Laurie's hand came out from under his coat. With a step forward he jabbed his gun in the pit of the "Carter" stomach.

"Spread 'em out on the bar, pap! Way out! That's right. Now, hold it."

Before a man in the room could wink an eye Laurie's free hand had searched his "parent" and freed him of his one weapon, a pocket-sized, nickel-plated plaything.

Gun play! Two or three men started to draw in defense of their troubled host, but the barkeeper stopped them.

"Cut it," he snapped, bringing his own gun suddenly up from under the bar. "This is a family row. I know Mister Kennedy. You guys keep out!"

"Thanks," acknowledged Laurie, still keeping his gun in the pit of his victim's cringing anatomy. "This is all in the family, all right and no trespassers invited. But it's going to be too one-sided to be called a row. My papa is up against an unpleasant evening, as I will now endeavor to demonstrate."

"Say," wailed the helpless victim, his hands sprawled out on the polished mahogany. "Why the guy stuff? What have I ever done to you?"

"That's just what I'm coming to," Laurie answered. "To my mind you did plenty. Now, I'll ask my first question. Tell me, dad, why did you take me away from my mother when I was a tiny little baby and dump me in an orphan asylum?"

The question was asked in a calm voice the tone deadly cold. The hangers-on drew back, silenced. The barkeeper folded his arms on the bar.

"Hot dog!" he murmured, and beamed.

"Dumped you? What d'ya mean, I dumped you?" The impostor, cornered, was fighting for time to think.

"My mother informs me," continued the younger man, "that my father took me away from her and chucked me in the discard. You, being my father, should remember it. Or possibly I have been misinformed. *Possibly* you are *not* my father, but are just some grafter trying to pass yourself off as Ben Carter. When I come to think of it, you look to me a lot like a tinhorn named Montana Bill that used to hang around here when the rush was first on!"

The barkeeper straightened slightly in quick surprise. The riff-raff of the barroom stared helplessly, and backed further away. One man, gone momentarily rigid at the mention of the name, flushed to his temples, stared hard at the figure sprawled against the bar, then staggered hurriedly from the scene.

Montana Bill, feeling his mask stripped

away, begged with his frightened eyes for mercy. But Laurie pressed his merciless pursuit.

"Quick," he demanded. "Are you my father?"

"Sure," gasped Montana Bill, his face drawn in fear. "Come upstairs, Kid. We'll talk it over." Montana's surrender was complete, his tones appealing.

"Up in number *Thirteen?*" Kennedy asked it with a smile of derision.

"Sure," whined the impostor. "Anywhere! We'll talk it over."

The younger man lowered his gun.

"If you'll kindly excuse us," he said, addressing the barkeeper, "I'd hate to muss up your nice grill with a rotten thing like dad. The privacy of room Thirteen will be much more fitting. Come on, Pop. *Mush!*"

The crowd in the bar-room milled about, some staring wildly, others still eager to interfere.

"Right this way, gents," barked the grim barkeeper. "This one is on the house. And you'll be a damn sight safer right here than trying to butt in on Kate Rendo's Kid. He can be some nasty when he gets riled up!"

VIII

"NOW, Montana," commanded Lawrence Kennedy, as he closed the door of room number Thirteen, "clear off that table and place two chairs on opposite sides of it. That's right. Now, sit down and give me your attention."

"Cut the chatter!" begged the impostor. "I'll get out."

"Maybe. I'm not sure. Just now I'm in charge of the meeting. Sit down!"

Montana Bill complied, but the gambler in him rallied. He pulled a bluff.

"Don't go too far, Kid. You can't scare me. I know my stuff. I got something on old Kate. Got a-plenty!"

Laurie eyed him calmly. "Would you like to tell it, Bill?" he asked. "I'll call the Mounted. I'm sure they would like to hear it. All about shooting my own father that night after you had croaked a man at the Forks."

Montana Bill ground his teeth.

"All right," he sneered. "Call 'em! I'll come clean. I'll swing, but old Kate will get life for helping me make my getaway."

"Sure," replied Kate Rendo's Kid, with a smile. "That's just why I will not call them. I just wanted to be sure you *were* Montana Bill. Just wanted *to hear you say it.*"

Montana Bill flared in anger.

"All right," he roared. "You're grafters, you and your mother! You've got no right to that gold mine. It was Carter's. And old Kate wasn't his wife. She was just his bundle!"

Laurie's gun came up over the edge of the table.

"Slow down, Bill. I can't blame you for being sore. You've had a very pretty little graft. Now that it's over, it's just like your kind to squeal. But from now on please confine your remarks to *me.* Leave my mother out of the conversation."

"Well, you know what you are!"

Laurie's eyes narrowed, and he slid his gun a foot nearer to Montana Bill.

"Say it, Bill," he said quietly. "I've never heard it. Go on! Say it! It will be your last word, and I'll take my chances with the Red Coats."

Montana Bill wilted. "All right," he growled. "You've got the cards."

Laurie laid his gun back in his lap.

"If you were any kind of a gentleman, Montana," he began, "I could tell you that I am perfectly satisfied with my origin. I could tell you what constitutes a Common Law marriage, but it would go right over your crooked head. So far as the Heart-Break is concerned, comfort yourself. Mother's title is clear. So is mine. By adoption I'm a Kennedy. And tomorrow Mrs. Ben Carter is going to adopt me back again. I'll be the man of the house and a *Carter.* All of which brings me back to *you.*"

Montana Bill sat speechless, all his guns spiked.

"I got to hand it to you, Kid," he confessed. "You got the Rendo nerve, all right. I ought to know."

"Coming to you," continued Laurie, ignoring the interruption, "there are two ways to look at things. Some men would say I ought to croak you for killing my father. Some would say no, that you were shooting in self-defense. I don't accept either philosophy. I'm going to pass

over that episode out of respect for my mother. She's had enough heartbreak in her life. I'm not going to drag her into court just to prove your rotten identity. Besides, killing is too good for a skunk like you. I want you to live and know that Kate Rendo's Kid is ready to plug you the first time you peep."

Montana Bill breathed easier.

"Well," he snapped, "where do we go from here?"

"To a consideration of you as a plain grafter. I could plug you for your blackmailing of my mother, and the miners would applaud me. But again it would involve her to prove the facts. I intend to make this my own little party. And, Bill, *darling,* as little as you deserve it, I'm going to give you a sporting chance. Now watch me closely."

Laurie Kennedy took from his pocket five twenty-dollar gold pieces and laid them in the center of the table. Then he laid his gun in front of him, and placed Bill's gun at Bill's right hand. Montana Bill watched eagerly.

"Down on the river front," began Laurie, "there is a launch waiting for you. There are two men in charge. The launch is well stocked and the men are prepared to make a quick trip down river to the American side. The transportation bill is paid. Here, on the table, is a hundred dollars to go in your pocket for necessities when you get over the border. Now you may pick up that hundred and go with me to the river, or—"

Bill waited, feeling Laurie's cold eyes on him. He sensed the alternative, and knew in his heart that he dare not take it.

"Or," continued the calm youth, "reach for your gun and I'll reach for mine. They are fairly placed, right in front of us. We will make room number Thirteen live up to its name. . . . That's all, Bill. I'm watching where your right hand goes."

Montana Bill slumped back in his chair, a very much relieved adventurer.

"All right, Kid," he said. "The game's yours! But I want my gun back. I may need it down river."

"I'll give it to the skipper," answered Laurie. "He knows the kind of freight that goes with this charter. You will get your little toy when he's ready to give it to you. Come on. He's waiting for us."

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AS they emerged from the door of room Thirteen three men held them up with drawn guns. The leader of the three was the man who had raced away from the bar at the mention of Montana Bill.

"Excuse us, Mister Kennedy," said he. "You can give *me* his gun. We've been listening at the door. We heard the confession. Go dismiss your launch and leave this snake to us!"

As Lawrence Kennedy stood undecided he went on grimly:

"I'm a brother of the man he killed at the Forks, Mr. Kennedy. These men are my friends. My claim on him beats yours. I want him!"

Montana's surprise at the hold-up changed to shaky panic.

"I'm not Montana Bill!" he screamed. "I'm not. My name's Carter!"

"Your name's mud," said the leader of the Vigilantes coldly. Turning to Laurie, he continued: "You need not tell Mrs. Carter about this, Mister Kennedy. We are glad she saved him from the Red Coats that night. Saved him for *us*. Just between us, here's the play. We have four horses outside. We shall ride up creek a piece and then hit into the hills. When we come back, *one* saddle, it's likely, will be empty. And every sourdough in this gang knows how to keep his mouth shut!"

Montana Bill threw his arms around Laurie.

"You tell 'em!" he begged. "Tell 'em I'm your father!"

Laurie Kennedy stood stock still. Looking into Bill's wild eyes he answered quietly.

"A killer, a grafter, and now a squealer. Bill, I'm ashamed of you. You're a poor loser."

"I'll tell the Red Coats!" Bill shouted. "I'll put Old Kate into this!"

The leader thrust his gun in the frantic man's ribs.

"One more peep out of you," said he, "and I'll bore you. The Mounted isn't in on this. It's *my* party. Now, *mush!*"

Laurie followed them out, saw them mount their horses, and fade into the midnight haze. He stood watching.

"Just look at that now," he mused, a sense of relief settling over him. "I didn't realize what an accommodating cuss this Montana person could be. Took it right out of my hands, didn't he? Just naturally went and hanged himself."

UP at Eighteen above, Tahoe Tim Foley and smiling Red Gleason sat shoulder to shoulder on their door sill. They were watching a red-haired young man standing beside the boiling sluices on Nineteen.

"I see by the Dawson paper," said Red, "that he has changed his name back again. He's Mister Carter now. I have a hunch we ought to herd him down to the Forks and pull a christenin' party."

"Lay off," decreed the cautious Tim. "That new deal is just a family matter. I know what I know. It's just to keep the records straight. That red-head yonder was properly christened one time right here on the Yukon. He was, and is, and always will be, Kate Rendo's Kid."

"Maybe so," agreed Red. "But I'm here to say he was born lucky."

"Back of that," added the philosopher, "he was lucky to be born. Just suppose there hadn't been any Kate Rendo!"

"Gosh," agreed Red. "He'd have been a never-was."

"Lucky to be born," repeated Tahoe Tim, elbows on his knees.

"And," pursued the talkative Red, "the paper says a guy callin' himself Ben Carter blew in town day before yesterday and blew right out again. Thursday it was. Paper says he claimed to be *the* Ben Carter."

"So the Kid was tellin' me."

"Well, what would a guy be doin', claimin' to be a dead man, that a way?"

"Lookin' for trouble," drawled Tahoe Tim.

"Huh! Must have found it right quick."

"Not hard to find, with the Kid on the job. Bet you a thousand ounces to a case of wine he never shows up again."

Red sat thinking. Suddenly, he exploded.

"Say, pard," he said, "the Kid *was* in town on Thursday. Bet you he—"

"Somewhat!" drawled Tahoe Tim.

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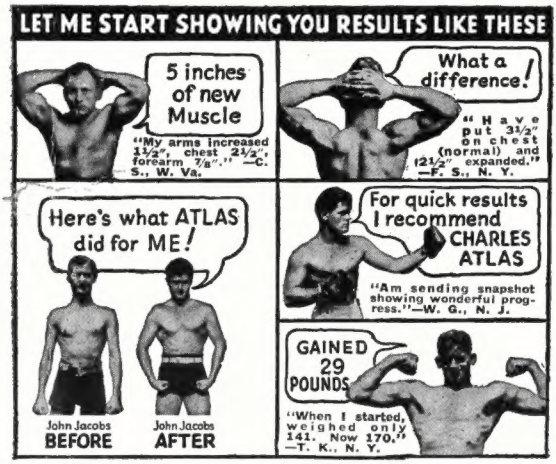
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